

















# THE WORLD'S WORST WOMEN

## ABOUT THIS BOOK :

"Woman," writes the author, "is without parallel when she enters the realm of crime," and it is clear from the astounding examples in this book that there is nothing quite so bad as a bad woman. The author describes the careers of a dozen 20th-century women of different nationalities whose wickedness seems almost unbelievable. But every case true. ●

Mrs. Belle Gunness, for instance, murdered over 20 people and was, ironically, herself murdered and buried in her own garden cemetery. Vera Renczi, a Rumanian, killed two husbands, one son and 32 lovers! Martha Wise poisoned 17 relations. Marie Becker, a Belgian nurse, killed 11 patients and made five unsuccessful murder attempts in addition. Dr. Zoe Wilson killed six husbands.

The stories are deliberately told matter-of-factly. It is true these sinister women all came to a bad end, but the author is not concerned to point a moral. This is an astonishing book of absolutely absorbing interest.

*By the same author:*

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**.THE OLD BAILEY AND ITS TRIALS  
THE TRIALS OF MR. JUSTICE AVORY  
CAVALCADE OF JUSTICE**

THE  
World's *Worst* Women  
(OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY)

by  
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## Preface

AS gentle in love as she is violent in hate, as extravagant in self-sacrifice as she is insatiable in her lust for wealth or power, and as unyielding in virtue as she is wanton in wickedness, woman is without parallel when she enters the realms of crime.

Ever since that slight error of diet in the Garden of Eden, woman has, throughout the ages and in every country in the world, left many monuments to her goodness; but—in many instances, she has also left a long trail of ruin, devastation and death. (If her beauty has been the cloak to a thousand virtues; it has also been the mask of a depravity as ugly as it is vile.)

It would require a whole library of books to tell the stories of *all* the women who qualify for inclusion in such a cavalcade of feminine evildoers as this and it has been no easy task to make a selection of those whom I consider to be among "The World's Worst Women" of this century. There are others who some may think are more entitled to be dealt with in the following pages, but the selection is a purely personal one, made with a view to varying the locale so that no one nation shall feel it has a monopoly in this sinister sisterhood.

It may be that no moral is to be drawn from any of the stories I relate, so let me merely present their heroines as *horrible examples*.

## THE "SWAMI" - BRIDE OF THE LORD

THE present century had hardly got into its stride when there landed on these shores two of the most pestiferous humbugs who ever lived.

They were Frank Dutton Jackson, a spare, insignificant looking man of 35, and Editha Loleta Jackson, his 47-year-old wife, a fat and ungainly woman who proudly claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of mad King Ludwig I of Bavaria and his mistress, Lola Montez, famous dancer and notorious adventuress. Why this doubtful origin should be a matter for pride I do not pretend to know.

There was little in the appearance of Editha Jackson to support her claim, for, whereas Lola was petite and graceful of figure, with raven black hair and dark flashing eyes, her self-styled "daughter" was a mountain of shapeless flesh, ample of bosom, coarse of feature, with mousey coloured hair and small lacklustre eyes set in a cruel looking face. A gross looking woman if ever there was one. Yet she professed to be the high priestess of religious cult, and also claimed to have the gift of prophecy and to be the medium of life eternal. A ruthless, dominant personality, who, as we shall see stuck at nothing to gain her vicious end.

"The Swami," was how she delighted to call herself, while her less impressive husband rejoiced in the name or title of Theo Horos. It was in connection with their claims to mysticism and revelation that "The Swami and Theo," as they became known, were sent to long terms of penal servitude at the Old Bailey in the year 1901.

A shocking story of human depravity and religious imposture was unfolded at their trial. A procession of girls—one in her teens

—entered the witness-box to relate how this man and woman had inveigled them into their "Temple" on the pretence of training them for the "higher life," but in fact had only encompassed their moral and physical corruption.

The charge against the man was that of raping a sixteen-year-old girl in the presence of and with the aid of the female prisoner who stood charged with abetting him in his loathsome practices, carried out under the cloak of religion. There were six other counts besides. Theo was sent to penal servitude for a well-merited fourteen years. The Swami—whom I have always regarded as the prime mover in the debauchery indulged in by these leaders of the "Theocratic Unity and Purity League"—was lucky to receive only seven years imprisonment.

• Long before this debased pair descended upon our hospitable land however, they had—both separately and in company—practiced their infamous rites and ceremonies in other countries. And it will be well thus early in our story, to take a glimpse into their careers that we may the better understand the working of their evil minds. To do this it will be necessary to accompany them along the road they traversed ere reaching the climax of their depravity in the peaceful purlieu of Bloomsbury, London, where they ran their "Temple," and where a stop was put to their wicked ways.

Ladies first! Far from being the daughter of Ludwig and Lola, it must be recorded that the Swami, as I shall call her throughout this record, was born of parents in a much humbler and less spectacular walk of life. She was the daughter of a musician named Salomon who went as an immigrant to the States in the year 1849, claiming to be a political refugee from Germany. He called himself "Professor," but whether he had any right to such title is not known.

Soon after he and his wife arrived in America, Mrs. Salomon gave birth to a daughter whom she named Editha. Of Editha's childhood little is known beyond the fact that she went to school in New York City. Nothing was heard of her in fact until she figured in a sensational court action against a certain Victoria

Woodhull. She gave her name as Editha Gilbert Montez and alleged that she had deposited with Mrs. Woodhull a diamond ring of great worth, together with notes to the value of 2,000 dollars. She was now seeking to recover them.

The defendant was one of two famous sisters, who, besides being in a large way of business as "woman Brokers" were personal friends of King Edward VII, and were also among the pioneer suffragettes of America in their spare time. Ardent feminists, both Virginia Woodhull and unmarried sister Tennessee Claflin, were militant crusaders against social evils including prostitution and abortion. They formed a Male Rescue Society for the suppression of street-walking, and campaigned vigorously against other vices of that day.

It is necessary that you should know these facts in order to appreciate the cunning of the twenty-year-old Editha in bringing an action against two such well-known women. It sheds an illuminating light on the psychology of this young girl who could prepare so subtle a blackmailing trap, even though it failed to snare her would-be victims.

Observe the nature of her approach to the sisters as given in evidence during the proceedings. Editha came to her, said Mrs. Woodhull, claiming that she was the daughter of Loh Montez and was stranded penniless, alone, and unprotected in New York City. Unless she could obtain help, she declared, so great was her desperation that she would go on the streets.

Was there ever a more sure and certain way than this, to appeal to the sympathies of the two sisters whose energies were devoted to wiping out this very evil in their fair city? As Victoria Woodhull told the court, she gave Editha five dollars, which was gratefully accepted. The girl then informed her benefactors that she was a medium of some experience and that she had hoped to give a series of lectures at the Steinway Hall, New York. Neither rings nor notes had ever been left with her, declared Mrs. Woodhull.

Meantime the police had been making enquiries about Editha Montez and discovered that she had duped a number of other

people by means of similar stories in other assumed names. The case was dismissed, and Editha was sent for observation to a mental home on Blackwell's Island, East River. While there she met Paul Messant whom she married on February 5, 1871. A baby girl was born to them, but after the death of Messant in 1872, Editha decided to become a spiritualistic medium, and—nothing more was heard of her daughter Alice. What became of her remains a mystery.

Assuming the impressive title of "The Swami," and garbed in the flowing draperies and Grecian hair style for which she later became notorious, Editha embarked on her mediumistic career with infinite resource and remarkable cunning. She travelled the country giving public and private seances, mingling her messages from The Beyond, with fortune telling and crystal gazing. She read the future for her clients and "advised" on all business and domestic matters, and such was her popularity among her dupes that she became known as "Angel Anne," but there was little angelic about her either physically or spiritually. She was developing the grossness of body which characterised her in later years, and with it she developed an equal grossness of mind.

Among those who attended her demonstrations was one Joseph Diss Debar—a surveyor by profession with no mean ability in his hobby as a painter of pictures. He fell beneath the spell of the Swami, who, realising that in him lay a further means of imposing upon her audiences, decided that she would become a bride for the second time. That her prospective husband was years older than herself mattered not a bit. He could paint pictures, and—he was also the author of a book on the problems of immigration. The significance of this fact will become clear at a later stage of our story.

Her honeymoon with the elderly Diss Debar was spent in beguiling him into assisting her in the production of "spirit pictures" on blank squares of pasteboard, apparently by supernatural means. The presentation of this trick—for trick it proved to be—was simple in the extreme, and like all simple tricks the more bewildering and convincing. A plain piece of cardboard

was taken by a sitter at a seance. After examination the card was marked in any way the holder thought fit, and it was then held edge downwards upon the sitter's head. The Swami would then go into a trance, and after a few seconds or perhaps minutes, she would, in hollow voice, command those present to examine the card.

Imagine the awed amazement of the circle of believers when they beheld on the unmarked side of the card a little painting—often with the paint still wet upon it. Sometimes, it was claimed the picture had been painted by none other than the spirit of Michelangelo, or Raphaël or even Rembrandt, who simply *used* the Swami to demonstrate to the modern world their prowess in the world of art.

And all the time—in the privacy of his studio—Diss Debar was turning out pictures of all kinds and sizes from portraits to landscape scenes.

The fame of the Swami spread abroad, and folk thronged to her seances to behold the wonders of her mediumship. At length there came to a spirit-painting seance, one, Luther Marsh, a wealthy and fashionable lawyer who resided on exclusive Madison Avenue. Connoisseur of art though he was, he was completely caught up in the spell woven around him by the Swami, accepted the pictures she produced as genuine works of art, and was so impressed with her psychic powers that he turned over his mansion home to be used as a "Temple of Truth" by the Swami and her husband—who had by now become General Diss Debar.

So utterly was lawyer Marsh hoodwinked that he transferred his house and all its valuable contents to the Swami "and her heirs for ever." Later on, however, when the medium was detected in a flagrant fraud, the transfer was withdrawn. The Swami was arrested on a charge of fraud and duly appeared in court. The case created a tremendous sensation and the newspapers spread themselves on the story to the fullest extent, and—not altogether in complimentary manner.

"The Diss Debar" said one, "her face is shaky with fat—but

the eyes of her. They are bright as crystals and she works them indefatigably."

Another paper also remarked on the brilliance of "Angel Anna's" eyes, declaring that "They sparkled like a telephone wire in a thunderstorm." The papers went all out to rake up everything they could about her past life, laying particular emphasis on the tragedies which followed what they termed "the love life" of the plump and billowing medium.

"Was it a coincidence that first husband Messant had died so soon after marriage to the Swami?" they asked. "How came it that a Mr. Loewenherz—with whom the prisoner lived for a time—died under rather mysterious circumstances?"

The Swami was as contemptuous of these insinuations as she was of the court proceedings. When asked by the judge, "Who are you?" she drew herself up to her full height and retorted that she was controlled by a Council of ten of the greatest men the world had ever known "I am under the direction of Cicero, Socrates, Homer . . ." she told the court. But—it did not impress the jury.

Sentenced to six months imprisonment, the Swami swept from the courtroom a magnificent if bulky figure.

On her release—Diss Debar having meanwhile divorced her—the Swami decided on another masquerade appearing in New Orleans as the Baroness von Rosenthal, Countess von Landsfeld, two of the titles which mad Ludwig of Bavaria had bestowed upon his mistress Lola Montez. She let it be known that she was possessed of strange occult powers and very soon was running another series of demonstrations under the title of the "Mystic of Orleans." It was during this period that she met Colonel McGowan whom she married in the name of Princess Editha Loleta Baroness Rosenthal, and who, by a strange coincidence, died a year later as had her husband Messant and lover Loewenherz.

Which brings us to the year 1896, with the Swami growing in girth and ungainliness, but still managing to impose upon men and women dupes alike. Two years went by! Two years during which the thrice wed Swami, lived by fraud and imposture. Then

she fell in with a young man who was to become her associate in a revolting and vicious partnership—a partnership that caused them to be hounded from one land to another until at last the law caught up with them in England and put an end to their misdeeds.

The man was Frank Dutton Jackson, twelve years younger than the Swami, and as strong a contrast in personality as it is possible to imagine. The woman, of ponderous and shapeless bulk, the man tall yet weedy, with thinning fair hair, sandy beard, and sallow complexion, certainly far from prepossessing in appearance. Yet—as was subsequently revealed—he was a man who had been carrying on a number of bogus religious rackets on his own, long before he became the fourth spouse of the Swami. He was known as Theo and Horos, under which names he had practised certain rituals and ceremonies up and down the States in which young girls and women figured largely as his victims.

Theo was a man of scanty education. Born in California he was still in his early twenties when he decided that it was only fools who worked. "I have been given a commission from Heaven to save the world," he declared, and opened a mission in Florida where he soon gathered around him a sufficient number of dupes who readily believed in his "supernatural" powers, and handed over their money for the foundation of a colony.

Theo insisted that only fruit, nuts and bananas should be eaten by his followers, announcing that there would be no salvation for those who ate the flesh of animals. Women flocked to the colony to hear the "message" which the "Master" gave out at his meetings. They gave up their homes to join Theo on his way to Heaven. They gave him their worldly possessions, they gave him their bodies in the fervent belief that by so doing they would become the "bride" of this self-styled "Saviour."

But the "Master" got careless! He became too avaricious and heedless of the ages of his victims, and was eventually sent to goal for fraud and offences in connection with young girls.

It was by the sheerest accident that he and the Swami met, and one may well wonder what attracted them to each other. It can't have been the ponderous figure of the woman twelve years the

man's, senior and looking even more, nor the physique of Theo, spare of build to the point of skinniness, and dominated by the Swami's overbearing personality. Maybe it was the simultaneous recognition that as partners, there was no limit to the heights they might soar as "teachers" of the "Higher Truths."

Why they ever troubled to get married is a matter for wonder since they had little regard for the sanctity of the married state. The wife acted as procuress for the insatiable lust of her husband, actually taking part in the so-called "religious" ceremonies by which he corrupted his girl and women dupes who believed him to be the Messiah come down to earth to save the world from everlasting torment.

Up and down the States of America they plied their way, setting up "Temples" where they carried on their sensual rites under the cloak of religion. They founded the "Order of the Crystal" of which the woman was the "Grand Principal." The Temples were lavishly draped and furnished in exotic Oriental style.

At last the pair were unmasked and sent to gaol, but they linked up again on release from prison when America became too hot to hold them. They made for South Africa, and in Cape Town they founded a "college of Anthrope-Magneto-Electro-Psychopathy, Osteopathy and Massage." They enrolled "students" at substantial fees, to sit at the feet of the "Heirophant and Grand Llama" (Theo Horos) and the Swami "Sapientia Doctoribus" who was also the High Priestess of the College, to qualify for the teaching of the "Subtle Occult Laws" referred to in the certificate reproduced below.

*Pathology of the College of Occult Sciences located on Cape Town, South Africa, to Grant and Teach all the subtle Occult Laws which embrace Anthrope-Magneto-Electro Psychopathy Osteopathy and Massage.*

*This Certifies that this Graduate is duly qualified to form Classes under the High and Mighty Title of Swami, for Spiritual and Mental Upbuilding.*

*Given under our hands and Seal this \_\_\_\_\_*



*Swami Sapientia  
Doctoribus*

*Heirophant and Grand Llama.*

*High Priestess*



There was little subtlety in the practices they carried on, or in the instructions they gave their pupils. In fact the "massage" they taught was more of the type practised in those questionable establishments which are invariably refused licenses in this country—those where elderly gentlemen seek the ministrations of young and attractive operators for other than strictly curative purposes.

Apart from teaching others the "higher truths" Theo Horos specialised in giving advice and spiritual healing to those who flocked to the College between the hours of 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., while the Swami *Viva Ananda* whose teachers were, she claimed, Mahatmas, continued her mediumistic activities, varying her performances by appearing as Madame Helena "seeress and clairvoyant."

Altogether the Swami and Theo did very well out of their occult teachings until rumours of their previous activities in the States began to get around Cape Town, and they soon deemed it advisable to seek other fields in which to operate. So they crossed the seas to Paris where they set up the same racket with equal success. The Swami started what was supposed to be a "Woman's Masonic Institution," but it was not long before certain facts came to light concerning the nature of the initiation rites, which made it necessary for them to leave France. This they did in the year 1900, crossing the Channel and settling down in Brighton.

It must have been a wonderful and impressive sight to see the cumbersome Swami perambulating along the front like some huge vessel under sail. Imagine her clad in the flowing voluminous robes she affected, accompanied by her bearded husband. People turned to stare at them with curiosity, and word soon got around that the spectacular and substantial apparition was the High Priestess of a certain religious cult and a "mystic" of great occult power.

It is at this stage of their history that they chanced to meet another religious impostor who was running an organisation from which Theo and Swami gathered a few new ideas. James

William Wood was a photographer by profession living in a house at Portslade only a few miles from Brighton. The house was mystically called "Arregosobah," and there, Wood, surrounded by his followers—mostly women of varying ages—resided in regal style. He was called "King Solomon" by his dupes, who, in turn were given various titles. Among them was "Queen Esther" who sat by his side on a dais in the large room set aside for the worshipping rites of the sect. Sometimes she was called the "Universal Mother," and it was proclaimed that at some future date she would give birth to a new Messiah.

Other lesser lights in the hierarchy were called "Sisters" and these would drape themselves around "King Solomon" and his "Queen" while other members of the sect danced and sang themselves into convulsions of ecstasy until they fell exhausted to the floor.

The room in which these performances took place was hung with crimson drapings, and decorated with occult symbols of various kinds.

Among the "Sisters" who were there when the Swami and Theo honoured "Arregosobah" with their august presence, was a Mrs. Sarah Adams, who rejoiced in the title of "Sister Miriam" or "Zobeya." She is of great importance to the story of the Swami and Theo, because it was her sixteen-year-old daughter Daisy, who became the victim of Theo's illicit attentions. Wood, it should be mentioned had already been in trouble with the police both in Maidstone and Brighton where he had "Temples." Rumours had got around that the services conducted within these places, far from being of a religious nature, were characterised by sensual and immoral rituals in which the disciples of King Solomon were compelled to take part. There were riots and the police had to intervene to restore order. In spite of this however, Wood continued to carry on, for apparently there was no lack of followers.

• The Swami and Theo left Brighton to tour the country giving lectures and demonstrations and gradually getting the feel of things over here. They were now appearing as mother and son,

instead of husband and wife, but their blasphemous pretensions were the same. In the August of 1901 they went to Birkenhead there to expound the "hidden truths" which they had found so profitable; there too, to meet once more Mrs. Sarah Adams—the "Sister Zobeya" of "Arregosobah"—who had returned to her husband and family from the spell-binding influence of King Solomon, although still a devout believer in his tenets.

Mrs. Adams offered the pair the hospitality of her home, and it was thus that Theo set eyes on Daisy Adams for the first time. A bright looking girl of sixteen with pretty curly hair, her very youth should have been a protection against the designs of the depraved pair. The Swami asked the girl whether she would like to come to London to be her "daughter." Overwhelmed by the majesty of the woman, and by the glibness with which she described how she would personally undertake her education in mundane things as well as guide her in spiritual truths of the higher religion which she called "Theocratic Unity, the girl looked to her father and mother for permission to go.

Daisy would study typewriting and shorthand under the tuition of son Theo, said the Swami, together with drawing and painting. She would personally look after the girl as though she were her own daughter. The parents consented, and on August 22, 1901, Daisy and her young brother Clifford accompanied the Swami and Theo to a house in Gower Street, Bloomsbury. This was the headquarters of the sect. On the first and second floors were the rooms occupied by the Swami and Theo and their followers, while the large front room on the first floor running across the width of the house, was decked out as a Temple where initiation into the "*Theocratic Unity and Purity League*" was carried out, and the various rites and ceremonies performed.

The Temple was furnished in the most sumptuous manner, the emphasis in the decor being Oriental. On a dais at one end of the room were two thrones on which sat Theo and the Swami, bedecked in the most fantastic costumes. Theo was got up like a Chinese mandarin, his highly coloured robes offering a strong contrast to the soft colouring of the furnishings. Lamps of beau-

tiful workmanship were ranged round the room giving out a subdued light heightening the mystic effect. All manner of strange occult emblems were draped on the walls, or else stood upon the altar. Here and there pictures were hung—pictures so crude and sensual in character as to defy description.

Such were the surroundings into which Daisy Adams was ushered, on the night of her arrival in London. Such was the layout of this "College of Life and Occult Sciences," where abstract things like "mental and magnetic therapeutics, psychology, clairvoyance, thaumaturgic power and Divine healing" were to be studied, and where lectures by "Theosopho' Provost"—Theo of course—were to be attended by the students. There were also special classes in "spiritual unfoldment" and the "science of life," lofty subjects which were woefully lacking in either spiritual or scientific values.

In addition to Theo and Swami there were in the Temple precincts a Dr. Mary Adams, a therapeutic practitioner, who had been with the Swami in South Africa, and a Mr. Bosanquet who acted as a sort of business manager. And Daisy Adams was not the only girl living at Gower Street. There was a girl named Phoebe, and three others who figure in this story, Vera Croysdale, Olga Rowson, and Laura Faulkner. Other more elderly followers also lived in this strange household. It is a matter for wonder how they came to fall under the spell of the leaders of this pernicious sect.

Soon after the Swami and Theo arrived in England, there began to appear in various newspapers throughout the land, advertisements worded in this strain:—

"Foreign gentleman, 35, educated, attractive, independent desires communication lady of means, view, matrimony. T.H., Box 749."

The advertisement differed according to the paper in which it appeared. Sometimes the advertiser was "handsome and refined," but usually he was of "exemplary habits."

How exemplary those habits were the reader will have gathered by now, for the advertiser, of course, was Theo. The

astonishing thing however, is that replies rolled in by hundreds, each of them being carefully vetted, ere the writers were invited to certain addresses where they would be interviewed by Theo and his "mother."

Vera Croysdale, for instance, was living in Hull when she saw one of these advertisements. She wrote giving particulars of herself and was invited to meet her would-be husband at Durand Gardens, Clapham. Only the Swami was in when she arrived, but later on Theo came in and kissed her. His "mother" invited Miss Croysdale to stay with them a few days, and—that was the beginning of the end so far as Vera was concerned. She was persuaded to leave Hull and come to London to prepare for her marriage to the bearded mystic, and it was thus that she chanced to be at the Gower Street house when Daisy Adams arrived.

By that time however, Vera had already succumbed to the wiles of her lover, and, partly in the belief that she was to become his wife, and partly because she had somehow come to accept his religious teachings, she shared his bed with the full knowledge of the Swami and—it must be said—her benedictions.

Such things may be hard to understand, but—there it is. Vera Croysdale came completely under the domination of Theo and his supposed mother, and became an absolute convert to a belief in his Divinity. She submitted to him without question, and but for something entirely outside this physical and spiritual relationship, so far as the girl is concerned, the activities of Theo and Swami might have continued.

It was a small and comparatively insignificant thing that led to the undoing of this iniquitous pair. Vera Croysdale was possessed of some small but valuable items of jewellery including a diamond brooch, gold matchbox, heavy gold bangle, turquoise ring and several other articles. Bit by bit they disappeared. She saw the ring being worn by the Swami, who had also taken a silver clock from the bedroom of Miss Croysdale when the latter was on holiday. Subsequently all the missing articles turned up at a pawnbroker's shop in the Strand where they had been pawned by Theo in various names.

When the girl requested that these articles should be returned to her, Theo tried to persuade her that they were "gifts laid on the altar of God." By this time however, Vera Croysdale was becoming a trifle mistrustful of her "divine" bridegroom-to-be. In spite of having ordered a bridal trousseau in keeping with her position as the wife of Theo, the marriage had failed to materialise. Other girls and women who had been lured into the Theocratic faith were also claiming to be prospective "brides" of the new Messiah. But it was not so much the blighted romance—if so it can be called—as the loss of her jewellery which inspired Vera to make the complaint which set in motion the processes of the law.

When the fact that the police were enquiring into the whereabouts of the missing jewellery came to the ears of Theo and Swami they promptly decided to leave Gower Street until things blew over. And where do you think they went? To the Birkenhead home of Mrs. Sarah Adams—the "Sister Zobeya" of the sect at "Arregosobah," Portslade—who had entrusted daughter Daisy to their care. But the arm of the law is long and ruthless, and reached out to Birkenhead to arrest the pair on the charge of "conspiring together, by false pretences and subtle devices" to cheat and defraud one Vera Croysdale of jewellery and money.

On the 26th September 1901 Theo and Swami appeared before Mr. Curtis Bennett the magistrate at Marylebone Police Court to answer this charge. There was at that hearing no mention of the more startling and sensational accusations which were to follow. Charged in the names of Theodore and Laura Horos, they presented an unusual spectacle even for a police court dock, where so many varied characters appear from day to day. The Swami was wearing a huge purple velvet hat and a light coloured coat from beneath which billowed a voluminous white garment very like a surplice. White gloves covered her hands in one of which she clasped a huge scent bottle. She almost overflowed the dock when she sat down. Theo not to be outdone in nattiness was wearing a fawn coloured suit with frock coat to match. He also carried a fawn bowler hat with brim curled in the latest fashion.

Two remands followed this first appearance in court, and then—on October 10, details of two more serious charges were made known. One alleged that the two prisoners had procured three young women, for immoral purposes. The other, brought under the *Criminal Amendment Act* alleged that a sixteen-year-old girl had been raped by the male accused under the most revolting circumstances. At last the searchlight of public enquiry via the police had been turned on the activities of the two people in the dock; and, if their behaviour in carrying out their religious rites was unusual, so also was their behaviour during the several hearings that followed.

On entering the dock the Swami assumed an attitude of prayer. From time to time during the proceedings she made sarcastic interruptions not always without humour. She also cross-examined witnesses at great length and now and again with skill. Mr. Charles Mathews (later Sir Charles), that doughty exponent of the prosecutor's case, appeared for the Director of Public Prosecutions and described how Vera Croydsdale, Olga Rowson, Laura Faulkner, and Daisy Adams had, to their ruin, come under the influence of Theo and Swami. He outlined the nature, of the beliefs into which they were initiated, described the layout of the "Temple" at Gower Street, and then read aloud the awful oath of initiation which all devotees had to take ere they were accepted into the "Order of Theocratic Unity and Purity League."

In the calm prosaic atmosphere of the police court it did not sound so terrible, but one can imagine the awe it would inspire on the susceptible girls who heard it amid the surroundings of the dimly lit and bizarrely draped room where the ceremony of initiation was carried out. It read:—

"I (name of the initiate) in the presence of the Lord of the Universe, and of this Hall of Neophytes of the Order of the Golden Dawn in the Outer, regularly assembled under warrant from the G. H. Chiefs of the Second Order, do of my own free will and accordingly and hereon, most solemnly pledge myself to keep secret this Order, its Name, the Names of its members, the proceedings which take place at its Meetings, from all and

every person in the whole world who is outside the pale of the Order . . . under the penalty . . . of being expelled from the Order as a wilfully perjured wretch and unfit for the society of all upright and true persons; and in addition, under the awful penalty of voluntarily submitting myself to a deadly and hostile current of will set in motion by the Chiefs of the Order, by which I should fall slain or paralysed with visible weapon as if blasted by the lightning flash. . . . So help me Lord of the Universe and my Higher Soul."

And if the oath itself was fearsome in its implications the initiation ceremony was equally awesome. In the Temple which I have already described, with Theo and Swami on their respective thrones, the novices were blindfolded and then led thrice round the room by means of a rope round their waist what time "acts of purification" were undertaken. At the end of these rites, when the eyes of the initiates were uncovered, they found themselves standing before the two leaders of the sect with a sword poised above their heads. Theo and Swami then recited a specially composed benediction and—the novices became members.

Later on there were other ceremonies carried out in utmost secrecy, during which the worshippers took part in what can only be likened to the black-magic rites of the Witches Sabbaths, where those who were supposed to represent the devil donned artificial aids of a phallic character in order to carry on their lustful orgies.

Such in brief were some of the "startling revelations" which came to light during the proceedings before Mr. Curtis Bennett, revelations only relieved by the outbursts and interventions of both accused. For example, the Swami objected that a word entered on the depositions was not the one used by a witness. The magistrate decided that it was, whereupon the female prisoner interjected scathingly, "I am just about tired of your siding with the witnesses. . . ."

Later on, in commenting on the way in which counsel read a statement, the Swami remarked, "The counsel may plead very well, but his oratory is very bad." Once when they were hissed

on leaving the dock, Theo turned round and shouted "Be quiet you reptiles."

The court was packed for each hearing, and crowds queued up outside in the hope of gaining entrance, just as they do today when any case that titivates their interest comes along. All were anxious to see the girls who had become victims of the man and woman who, by this time, were familiarly referred to as "Theo and Swami."

The girls shyly entered the witness-box. Vera Croysdale was the first to give evidence and related how, when living in Hull she saw a newspaper advertisement couched in the terms described earlier in the chapter. On receiving the answer she came to London, where she met Theo and Swami. She became a member of the organisation after Theo had produced a large Bible and referred her to the twelfth chapter of Revelations which, he said, explained all their religion. The "woman clothed with the sun" was the Swami, he declared, and the whole of the book referred to the Swami and himself. As Vera told the court that she had ordered special clothes for her marriage to Theo, the Swami sarcastically broke in with, "And I was to be your mother-in-law?"

The witness then went on to describe how she had succumbed to Theo in the belief that he was Divine and that some part of his divinity would be conferred upon her if she submitted herself to him. From that time onward she frequently slept in the same bed with Swami and Theo, the former uttering blasphemous prayers while Theo committed the acts complained of.

A similar story was related by twenty-six-year old Olga Rowson, who was working as a domestic servant in Bayswater when she read one of the matrimonial advertisements inserted by Theo. She told the court that she wrote in reply, and after meeting the Swami and her "son" she fell beneath the spell of their pseudo-religious inducements, even to sharing their bed with results that can better be imagined than described. "I could not resist the prisoners," she told the court; she was "quite helpless" in their presence. Theo would place his hands upon her brow producing a sensation of utter helplessness. During his visits to

her at night, said the witness, he made use of the most blasphemous expressions.

Miss Rowson then went on to describe how she parted with money which she had in the Post Office Savings Bank. Theo, accompanied her to draw it out, she said, and took it from her the moment they were outside the building. In the same way, at the instigation of the Swami, she parted with jewellery and other articles of value. It is incredible how Vera Croysdale and Olga Rowson (aged twenty-three and twenty-six respectively) acquiesced with such apparent readiness in the revolting practices of Theo and Swami. They were not children, and, as subsequently transpired during the police court hearings, both had written affectionate letters to their seducers. While on holiday in Somerset for example, Miss Croysdale wrote to the Swami beginning:

"My own dearest Swami" and signing herself, "Your loving daughter." Olga Rowson also wrote letters to both Theo and Swami calling the former "Dearest Theo" and the latter "Dearest mother," and asking her to "accept my love and kisses, and believe me to remain, ever your affectionate daughter, Olga." In yet another letter to Theo, she signed herself as his "ever loving and devoted Olga."

But it must be realised that the claim to divinity, and the rites carried out in the name of religion were subtly calculated, and cunningly used to impose upon the credulous minded. Nothing ever transpired to show that any of the girls who suffered at the hands of the loathsome pair, were anything but respectable persons with no immoral leanings.

Laura Faulkner (aged twenty) the third of the trio mentioned in the procuration charge was the daughter of a sanitary engineer living with her father at Camden Town, North London, when she first read "Mr. Astor's" advertisement emphasising his outstanding qualities as a prospective husband and inviting replies from ladies interested in matrimony. According to this witness, her father was rather strict. She was anxious to escape the parental nest and thought Mr. Astor might provide the way out.

The usual routine followed her meeting with Theo. He stroked

her face, told her she had a complexion "like strawberries and cream." He then began to question her with regard to her financial standing and also that of her father. Later on he told her that he was the "centre of the Divine Sphere," and, that while legal marriage was contrary to the rules of his Order, he must take unto himself a bride in order to fulfil his destiny.

"He put his fingers to my forehead and seemed to pinch my back down the spine" the witness told the court, producing a "kind of dizzy, sleepy effect." It was while in this semi-hypnotic condition that she submitted to him, the Swami being present on several occasions. The sensation created by these revelations stirred the public, for nothing like it had ever been known before. Yet even more startling revelations were to come.

At the eighth hearing of the case there stepped into the witness-box a young and attractive girl wearing a bright red Tam o' Shanter from beneath which hair hung down her back in long curls. She was wearing a navy blue jacket with bright shiny buttons. It was Daisy Pollex Adams, the sixteen-year-old victim of the rape mentioned in the charge. She told of her journey to London with the accused and of her initiation into the "sacred mysteries" in the presence of Vera Croysdale, Laura Faulkner, Olga Rowson, and other men and women of the Theocratic sect. Theo explained to her the "obligations" of his "religion" and told her that he was the son of God. The "Mother Spirit" had visited him, he declared and told him that she (Daisy) was to be "his little wife."

"I asked him if the Mother Spirit would visit me too," said the witness, "and he replied that she would when I had given up the world and had got to the life which he would teach me, but I must be obedient to all his orders and do everything he told me." Thus were the fears of this mere child quietened and her repugnance to what subsequently happened, overcome.

She went to bed with Theo believing him to be Christ Himself, and that he had come down from Heaven as he claimed. Theo insisted that by submitting herself to him she would "bring forth the birth of the Motherhood of God." The Swami tried to

persuade her that "after the Spirit Mother, she (Daisy) was next to his heart." But still the natural instincts of the girl revolted against that which she felt to be wrong, and, as she told the court she "struggled and resisted" to avoid his embraces. Yet in spite of her resistance and in spite of her pitiful pleas the Swami who was in the same bed with Theo and the girl, pinned Daisy's hand and arm in a strong relentless grip while Theo—the Swami's husband you will remember—accomplished his foul purpose.

Gasps of horror echoed through the crowded court as the story of Daisy Adams was told in all its shocking detail. After that dreadful first night it came to Daisy's knowledge that even while Theo was continuing his practices with her, he was carrying on similarly with the other girls—Vera, Olga and Laura. When she taxed him with it, said the girl, and told him he had no right to have so many wives, he replied, "Didn't Solomon have 300 legal wives and 600 others," and chided her for having broken her oath of initiation by talking about him to Vera, Laura and Olga.

On the fifteenth appearance of this unsavoury pair in the dock at Marylebone, Theo and Swami elected to go into the witness-box themselves. The following points are not without interest in revealing the nature of the defence. Theo told the court that, although known as Theo Horos, his real name was Frank Dutton Jackson. For years he had been the "adopted son" of the Swami, but that he was now proud to call this "noble lady" his wife. He then went on:—"For obvious reasons other than the ordinary, we were legally married three years ago, and although knowing at the time of the ceremony, and long before, that I was as I am, she did with saintly principle and heroic martyrdom consign herself to living immolation upon the sacred altar of celibacy, and through the principle to which we had dedicated our lives she became my true and faithful wife . . ." Which, if it means anything at all, means that the witness was impotent and incapable of committing the offences charged against him. A very important suggestion in view of later developments during the trial at the Old Bailey.

The Swami devoted her testimony to denying her previous

prison sentences, and declared that she was the victim of enemies who were members of rival sects. They had suborned the witnesses in the present case she said, to swear falsely against herself and Theo. She concluded by saying, "It is with the assurance and conviction of the absolute innocence of Theo Horos and myself of the crimes laid at our door, that I am enabled to stand here today conscious of the fact that truth ever comes uppermost, and that until justice is done, we can afford to wait."

On Wednesday, December 18th, 1901, the galleries and benches of the Old Bailey were packed to suffocation when Theo and Swami came before Mr. Justice Bigham the presiding judge. The indictment consisted of seven counts, some of them jointly against both prisoners, and others against the male prisoner alone. Sir Edward Carson, K.C. the Solicitor General now appeared for the Crown, with Mr. Mathews and Mr. Bodkin as his juniors. Both prisoners pleaded not guilty to all the counts, and elected to conduct their own defence. Throughout the police court proceedings the Swami had appeared in a variety of robes of varied hues, sometimes white, sometimes purple, sometimes blue; but always of voluminous magnitude.

Theo was the first to enter the dock, and on the appearance of the Swami he greeted her by bowing over her hand and reverently kissing it as though she were a queen. She strode with solemn majesty to the front of the dock and surveyed the court with something akin to contempt. No more imposing hypocrite ever graced the dock at the Old Bailey than the Swami. On the first day of the trial, she appeared in a flowing robe of white and mauve, her hair piled high upon her head in Grecian style, while around her brow she wore a band of some golden material. Her massive bulk simply dwarfed the bearded figure at her side. He presented an almost craven appearance as the trial progressed, sometimes snivelling and almost sobbing as he heard the evidence piling up against him. Not so his more virile spouse who gesticulated violently and protested in harsh metallic tones at what she termed the "filthy lies" of the prosecution witnesses. Sometimes she would sit back in her chair, her eyes closed ap-

Apparently heedless of what was going on. But not a word was missed by her alert if evil brain, and on the least provocation she would interrupt with a strident, "I object."

During his opening speech Sir Edward Carson was reading aloud one of the advertisements which had appeared announcing the Swami as an "occultist." By one of those slips of the tongue, Sir Edward pronounced the word *oculist*. A sardonic smile appeared on the face of the woman prisoner as she corrected him. "Occultist not oculist Mr. Prosecutor," she said and with a bow Sir Edward accepted the correction.

Later, when he was about to read the oath of initiation, both accused rose to their feet and assumed an attitude of solemn reverence during the recital.

Sir Edward confined his opening to the charge of rape—the most serious of all the seven counts in the indictment. In referring to the case of Daisy Adams he said that she had "been submitted to treatment which would have shocked and repelled a woman hardened in vice let alone a young girl of sixteen." Once more the trim and petite Daisy entered the witness-box to tell of her ordeal at the hands of the pair in the dock. For an hour and a half she underwent cross-examination by Theo who could not shake her on any point of her story. Then it was the turn of Swami. She hitched her robes around her and fixed the girl with a baleful eye as she demanded rather than asked:—

Have you ever heard me utter a word of lewdness or immorality? — No.

Have I ever instructed you in any immorality? — No — but you told me I must obey Theo and do everything he wished. And once when you asked me if I loved him and I said I loved you all, you said, "But don't you love him best?"

"What—" remarked the Swami as she gazed down towards Mr. Charles Mathews with whom she had had many a duel during the police court proceedings, "love Theo indeed. I might just as well ask you to love Mr. Mathews." The court rocked with laughter.

During her questioning of Daisy Adams, the Swami became

quite excited at times and made some ludicrous mistakes. As for example when she called Mr. Justice Bigham "your highness," and referred to "the infamous lies invented by the jury," meaning of course the prosecution. She so tangled her sentences, and interpolated so many parenthesis and asides, that the questions usually developed into a harangue so incoherent that the point of it was lost even to herself. The same sort of thing occurred during the cross-examination of Laura Faulkner. So impassioned was one of her flights of rhetoric that the learned judge was constrained to intervene with the mild suggestion "You must not frighten the young lady Mrs. Jackson." Without lowering her voice or her arm (which was uplifted in emphasis) the Swami retorted in grandiloquent tones, "My Lord, it is not the witness I desire to frighten, but the prosecution."

Sir Edward Carson rose to his feet with a smile. "My Lord—I am not personally frightened," he said.

"Sit down sir, sit down" screeched the Swami from the dock.

There was no hysteria however, when the Swami cross-examined Dr. Samuel Lloyd, divisional police surgeon attached to the police station at Tottenham Court Road. He had examined Daisy Adams and given rather sensational evidence on the matter. As one can imagine the evidence was of a highly clinical and anatomical nature. Undaunted however, the Swami leaned over the ledge of the dock and fired a battery of questions at the witness, questions which revealed considerable knowledge of biology. At the end of her questioning the prisoner expressed the opinion that Dr. Lloyd's views were "pathologically so empirical and sweeping" as to be of no value whatsoever.

But behind these light interludes ever lurked the shadow of the loathsome charges against the prisoners, evidence of which could not be shaken even by the astute mind of the virago in the dock. And on each day of the trial the Swami appeared in some new highly coloured vestment. They varied in hue from heliotrope to green and from purple to pink. On the last day—when both Theo and the Swami elected to give evidence on their own behalf, she wore a raiment of golden sheen. Both prisoners

repeated their denials of the charges, and insisted that the Theocracy they preached was founded on the principles of Christ's life. "And what did Daisy Adams learn?" queried the Solicitor General sternly.

"To love and be happy," replied the Swami promptly.

"Quite a liberal education," insinuated Sir Edward in a sarcastic voice, but the Swami was not disconcerted.

"A liberal education in a few weeks?" she scoffed. "Why they don't turn out even Solicitor-Generals as fast as that."

But all her glibness could avail her nothing. Although the Solicitor General waived his right to address the jury as the prisoners were not represented by counsel, and in spite of the impassioned speeches addressed to them by Theo and Swami the jury were only out for five minutes ere they returned with a verdict of "Guilty" against both prisoners.

Mr. Justice Bigham fully agreed with the verdict remarking that he could conceive no conduct more terrible than that of the male prisoner whom he sent to penal servitude for fifteen years. Nor could he understand how the woman, "said to be the wife of this man, could allow herself to be associated with him in the commission of this crime." He sentenced the Swami to only seven years on account of her greater age.

Theo bowed politely to the judge and vanished down the steps leading from the dock. The Swami began, "I thank you my lord. Along the Higher Path. . ."

But it was no higher path that these reprobates took, for the Swami went to Aylesbury Gaol while Theo eventually reached Dartmoor.

Before I go on to tell you something of the further exploits of the Swami—for her career of imposture was not yet finished—it may be well at this point to try and fathom the working of the minds of these two debased creatures, and of those who fell victim to their tenets. The first thing that suggests itself regarding Theo and Swami is that they were sex maniacs who had passed over the narrow line which separates sexual excess from sexual perversion. You will remember how, during the police court



THE "SWAMI"  
/



COUNTESS MARIE TARNOWSKA ENTERING THE COURTHOUSE AT VENICE  
(see *Sphinx* in *Grape*)

proceedings Theo claimed that he was incapable of committing rape because of his physical condition. Had that been proved he could not have been convicted on the major charge, and to my mind there would have been little chance of obtaining a conviction on the other counts for reasons which I shall explain. Let it be said that Theo agreed to an examination by Dr. James Scott, Medical Officer at Holloway Prison, and Mr. Christopher Heath a famous London surgeon. They reported that there was nothing to indicate any physical incapacity, and although Theo had suffered an operation for hernia, he was not—as he suggested, a eunuch.

So maybe the Swami had not "immolated herself on the sacred altar of celibacy and chastity" as Theo had suggested. An excessive carnal appetite is by no means uncommon as the case-books of psychiatrists and other medical men can substantiate. We are up against a different proposition in the case of the Swami however. How could any woman delight in procuring for her husband innumerable girls for the satisfaction of his lust? For their joint activities had not been confined to England, or to the four girls who appeared at the Old Bailey. And, having procured them, how could she share the same bed with her husband and his victims and deliberately connive at their corruption? She was twelve years older than Theo but that only made her fifty-two at the time of her trial. Is there any clue to her depravity in the ungainly proportions of her body. She was already tremendous in size, when, in 1888, she was described as the "portly swindler" during the fraud charge. She would then be only 39. But we have to remember that she was only just turned 20 when she imposed upon Victoria Woodhull in 1870 and was quite slim then.

Did the Swami then suffer from a pituitary disorder, some basic impairment of her metabolism and/or the presence of Frohlich's syndrome which could result in chronic obesity, and atrophy of the genital organs. We do not know. We can only surmise that the reason for her wearing the flowing robes which she affected mid-way in her career, was to hide her unwieldy bulk rather than to appear eccentric.

It would not appear that she was suffering from any of the symptoms I have mentioned, because, although slow and ponderous in her physical movements, her mind was vitally alert and she could think clearly and quickly, as was obvious at the trial. There was nothing sluggish about the mind that schemed her career of bogus mediumship and engineered the orgies of vice which led to her appearance at the Old Bailey on the very eve of Christmas—the anniversary of the birth of that Christ whom she and her husband so shamelessly blasphemed.

But what of the dupes who submitted themselves to the practices of these two perverts? That is one of the outstanding mysteries in this study of human frailty. None of the girls who appeared in court was a known immoral character, nor were any of the others who worshipped in the Temple at Gower Street and suffered the embraces of the unwholesome looking Theo. They all came from highly respectable families. All were able to communicate with one another, and there was no kind of restriction except—that terrible oath of initiation. That they *did* talk to each other and recount their experiences at the hands of both Theo and Swami is clear from the evidence produced after the latter were arrested.

Those girls could have walked out and stayed out at any time they liked. Vera Croysdale went away on holiday. Olga Rowson returned for a time to domestic employment. *They need never have returned to the cesspool of pollution in Gower Street.* But they did, and they also wrote quite affectionate letters to both Theo and the Swami. Yes!—they returned to carry on life as before. Obviously their minds were not their own after being under the influence of Theo; that was the excuse they gave for going back. And when Daisy Adams—perhaps the only one with whom one can feel total sympathy—was asked by Theo in cross-examination why she did not leave and return home, the only answer she could give was that she had not enough money to pay her fare. Was the awesome oath which bound them to secrecy sufficient to hold these girls in fear? Seldom has there been a more glaring example of human gullibility than that shown by the devotees of the cult

expounded by these two loathsome humbugs. One might have thought that the long sentences imposed upon them would have put an end to the exploits of Theo and Swami. Theo certainly fades out of the picture, for he died soon after leaving prison. In the meantime however, the Swami—was planning yet another masquerade. Throughout the term of her imprisonment she still delighted to pose as a woman of infinite holiness.

While at Aylesbury Gaol she obtained from the prison library a book containing an account of the Jezreelites. It was a sect founded in 1875 by a private soldier James White who, to further his claim to be a Messenger of God, adopted the alliterative names of James Jershom Jezreel. He claimed to have received a Divine Call and declared that he was the recipient of certain Revelations. All this must have sounded singularly familiar to the Swami as she browsed in her prison cell. Especially when she read that the imaginative James had established headquarters at a village called New Brompton, just outside Gillingham, Kent. There, it appeared, he had built a modern Tower of Babel where 144,000 of the "chosen" born since the time of Moses, would foregather on the Day of the Millenium, to meet and welcome Christ at His Second Coming, which said James, was very near.

Poor James! it was unfortunate that he should die in 1885 before the Tower was completed, and it must have been a sad blow to his followers when "Queen Esther" his wife who succeeded him, only lived another three years ere joining her husband. But the Jezreelites continued to linger around the unfinished building, and still cherished the "Flying Roll"—a sort of Bible on which they based their mystic teachings.

They dressed in queer garments, did not cut their hair which sometimes reached a length of three feet falling over their shoulders in disorderly array. Patiently they awaited the Second Coming, and in the meantime prepared a golden altar, and provided richly bedecked vestments, together with a sum of £500 in gold wherewith to celebrate the joyous advent of the Messiah.

Such was the story that the Swami read in the lonely confines of her cell at Aylesbury, a story which at once presented itself to her

astute and opportunist mind as yet another chance to indulge her pet imposture.

Released from Gaol in August 1906 she betook herself to New Brompton, arriving in the magnificent Grecian robes she always affected, her hair still upswept and piled high upon her head—just as she had worn it at the Old Bailey. And thus she presented herself to the waiting Jezreelites, declaring herself to be the “High Priestess” mentioned in the “Flying Roll.”

“Are you ready for the Second Coming?” she demanded of them, and when they vociferously acclaimed their readiness and prostrated themselves at her feet kissing the hem of her robes, she declared that she was the “Bride of the Lord” who had come to await the Bridegroom, and that in the meantime she would perform a few miracles in honour of His expected visit.

With reverent solemnity they brought out the sacred vestments and the golden altar together with a copy of the “Flying Roll” and the £500 in gold. Graciously she accepted them, and then departed to a “secret place” for meditation and prayer so that she might gain the necessary power to perform the miracles she had promised. For days the members of the sect fasted and prayed. But when some time had passed, and there was no sign of the Swami, enquiries revealed that she had vanished with the gold and the vestments and was on her way to Detroit where the American headquarters of the sect were situated.

With the proofs of her “holiness” cunningly obtained from her dupes in England, she had no difficulty in imposing upon the “Flying Rollers” in the States for some months, until they got rather tired of waiting for the “proofs” which she had declared would be vouchsafed from supernatural sources. “I will attend the Temple at sunrise on April 1st”, she declared—an appropriate day in all truth—“and then shall prove to all scoffers beyond any doubt that I am the appointed of the Lord.”

The faithful Jezreelites thus comforted and assured assembled long before sunrise on the appointed day and indulged in prayer. From sunrise till sunset they remained, fasting and praying but the “Bride” did not appear. As night drew on they sent a dep-

utation of the leaders to the apartments of the Swami only to discover that she had disappeared taking with her the entire funds of the community amounting to about £2,000 leaving them nothing but their long hair to keep their faith warm.

About three weeks later—on the beautiful lake near St. Andrews just outside Montreal—a large and charming house was taken by a Mrs. Mackenzie and her "son" Donald, together with a house-keeper. Mrs. Mackenzie was a sight to arouse the wonder and admiration of all who beheld her, for while throughout the day she wore virginal white robes of finest silk, at night she appeared clad in equally striking robes of royal purple. Her huge picture hats were trimmed with large drooping plumes while solid gold chains were looped around her waist, and also fell in long priceless loops from her shoulders.

Yes ! It was the Swami with the loot from the Tower at New Brompton, decorating her unwieldy body. She was the widow of a scotch clergyman, she stated, and told wondrous stories of her travels in many lands. She was too, an authoress inspired in her writings by heavenly guidance. In Montreal she ran a number of classes among wealthy people teaching mental healing, telepathy, astrology, psychology and spiritualism, and was a high priestess of the Persian religion Behaism. There was also an eminently practical side to her claims, for she became acquainted with a great financial magnate who "supported" many of her philanthropic schemes—the chief beneficiary being herself—and on his death it was discovered that most of his securities had been sold, the proceeds having been handed over to this vampire of religion.

"Mrs. Mackenzie" instituted a big emigration scheme by which young men from the poorer districts of London would be sent out to Canada to help to develop the country. Wealthy Canadians poured their money into the scheme, and it was one of the emigrants under this scheme who brought about the final undoing of this crafty adventuress. The moment he set eyes on the "benefactress", he exclaimed excitedly, "Why that's the Swami. I was present at her trial. I am sure it is the same woman." His declar-

ation recalled the huge sums of money which had been contributed to certain charities but which had never been expended on the objects for which they were intended. The police of Quebec were informed. Scotland Yard and the Liverpool police were contacted, photographs of the Swami and specimens of her handwriting were sent across, and—once more the Swami saw the inside of a gaol.

On her release from prison, broken in health, she vanished from the scene of the former exploits to die during World War I, a poverty-stricken old woman unmourned but not forgotten.

## II

### OGRESS OF PARIS

**I**T was murder for murder's sake that caused a frenzied mob to gather outside the Seine Assize Court, Paris in the year 1910, and cry "Death to the Ogress."

The object of their angry demonstration was Jeanne Weber, seven times a strangler, and surely one of the strangest criminals who ever flashed across the pages of crime. Strange—because the murders she committed were not inspired by lust for gold, as are so many murders, nor were they the outcome of violent passion. From none of her crimes did Jeanne ever benefit by one penny piece, nor was she goaded into murder by the conduct of a faithless husband or fickle lover.

All seven of her victims were helpless children ranging from seven months to seven years in age. After being twice acquitted in connection with six child murders, Jeanne strangled yet another infant under the most revolting circumstances.

Small wonder that the crowd which thronged the street outside the court clamoured and yelled "Death to the Ogress" as she drove from prison to court to face her trial. Small wonder that they made an ugly rush towards the police vehicle in which she was driven back to gaol after the day's hearing. There is little doubt that they would have lynched Jeanne Weber could they have got at her, so incensed were they at her crimes.

But—to my mind there were others as guilty as Jeanne and more responsible than she for the slaughter of at least five of the innocents who suffered death at her cruel hands. I refer to the professors and medical experts who were called in to carry out examinations on the bodies of the little ones, and who declared that they found nothing to arouse any suspicions of foul play. The experts were

responsible for the acquittal of Jeanne at the first two trials in which she figured, and thus enabled her to slay still more helpless babes. I shall go into this matter at greater length later on. In the meantime let us turn to the crimes which earned for Jeanne Weber the unsavory title "The Ogress of Paris."

Jeanne was one of eight children born in the little French village of Keritry (Cotes du Nord). Her father was a fisherman and there was nothing in the early life of his daughter to indicate that she would become a murderess of a most sadistic type. At the age of fourteen she left home to take up a post as a maid with a good family, and from that time her parents never saw or heard of her again until her crimes elevated her to the front pages of the newspapers.

In the meantime the girl had gone from place to place leading a somewhat nomadic existence until she reached Paris where she met and married Marcel Weber. Marcel was one of four brothers all of whom lived in the Goutte d'Or, a district of Paris with squalid tenement houses, brothels and factories.

Such was the scene in which tragedy after tragedy was played out in the Weber family. Within a month all three brothers had suffered cruel bereavements. The two little daughters of Pierre had died under mysterious circumstances within nine days of each other. A fortnight later the seven-months old daughter of Leon Weber died in similar tragic circumstances while eleven days afterwards the ten-months-old son of Charles Weber met a similar fate.

Nor did the Marcel Weber family escape its toll of death for on the same night that the baby-girl of Leon Weber died, the seven-year-old son of Marcel and Jeanne was found dead from suffocation. Jeanne had strangled her own child while he lay asleep beside her in bed, just as she had strangled the other child members of the Weber family.

How was it that she escaped being found out and brought to justice? That is the story I propose to tell, for there is nothing like it in the annals of crime. There have been mass murders both before and since Jeanne Weber became notorious. But—there has never

been any series of crimes committed where the evidence that murder had been done was so clear, or where the finger of suspicion pointed so unerringly at one particular person.

Jeanne lived with her husband and Marcel her little son aged seven, at 1 bis Passage of the Goutte d'Or. They were ideally happy together and found pleasure in watching their three children grow up. There was only one shadow in their happiness—Jeanne had given way to drinking and from time to time indulged in bouts of drunkenness during which she became a totally different woman. This addiction to strong drink became more pronounced after the death of her first two children. There was nothing suspicious about their deaths, and it is only fair to say this in view of the subsequent history of the Ogress. The loss of the two little girls within a short time of each other, left her sad and disconsolate, and, as was revealed during the enquiries into her state of mind, she became subject to fits of profound melancholy.

So we come to the year 1905. One cold Thursday morning in March of that year, Madame Pierre Weber called at the home of Jeanne.

"I wonder whether you could come round," she said, "and look after Georgette and Suzanne for me, while I go to the wash-house? They are a bit better but the pneumonia has left them very weak and I don't like leaving them alone while I do the washing." In those days there were public wash-houses where the housewife could take her clothes to wash.

"Of course I will," replied Jeanne, and promptly donned hat and coat. She accompanied her sister-in-law to the flat she occupied, and was given a warm greeting by her two little nieces who were very fond of their auntie. Her mind at rest, Mme Pierre Weber sallied forth with her bundle of dirty clothes and reached the wash-house.

She had hardly got settled down at her tub when Madame Pouche, a next door neighbour came rushing breathlessly into the place. "Oh, come home—come home quickly," she cried, "Georgette is very ill. I heard her crying as I passed your door and saw her lying on the lap of your sister-in-law. She was choking . . ."

The distracted mother dropped everything she was doing and accompanied by her kindly neighbour dashed home to find her daughter in bed with Jeanne standing over her, her hands beneath the bedclothes apparently massaging the child's chest. Mme Pierre picked up the little girl and took her upon her knee gently massaging her until she showed signs of recovery. Meanwhile Jeanne stood sullenly by, saying nothing as to what had happened to the child. For a few minutes more the mother stayed with tiny Georgette, and then seeing that the child appeared to be quite herself again, she returned to the wash-house to complete her washing.

"Look after her well, Jeanne," she said. "I think she'll be all right now. It was probably a little fit of some kind."

"I'll look after her," Jeanne answered as her sister-in-law went out of the door.

An hour later Pierre burst in upon his wife still engaged on her chores at the wash-house. His face was ashen white, and he could hardly stem back his tears as he cried, "You must come at once—Georgette has had a seizure and I am afraid she is dying."

Alas! his foreboding was only too well-founded. When he and his wife reached home their daughter was dead. Her face was suffused and blue, her eyes which only a few hours before were sparkling with life seemed almost bolting from her head, while her little body was contracted in the most peculiar manner.

Jeanne stood by, her sallow face showing no signs of grief or any other emotion. Good neighbour Madame Pouche was also there—a frown upon her face as though she were trying to puzzle something out. The doctor was sent for, and ere he came Mme Pouche called the husband aside.

"There are strange marks on the throat of the little one" she told him. "Angry red marks as though fingers had clutched it . . . ." Pierre Weber went over to the bed and looked at the inert body of little Georgette. He leaned over and saw the marks which the neighbour had noticed.

"I'll point them out to the doctor when he arrives," he murmured. But—whether he was too stunned with grief and forgot,

or whether he did not attach much importance to them, the fact is that he did *not* mention them to the doctor and the hapless child was buried without further enquiries. Thus no suspicions appear to have been aroused against Jeanne, and her lack of emotion at the tragedy seems to have been put down to shock at the sudden death of her little niece.

Nine days later—on March 11 to be exact—Suzanne, the sister of Georgette, died under almost identical circumstances.

Once more Jeanne was alone in the house with the child when death claimed her. Madame Pierre Weber had asked her sister-in-law to look after Suzanne while she went shopping. Since the tragedy of little Georgette, she explained, she felt she could not leave her alone in the flat while she was out. She would only be a few minutes.

But—during those few minutes Suzanne suffered a “~~seizure~~” from which she never recovered. When the already bereaved mother returned from her shopping expedition she found the baby lying on the bed, her eyes protruding, her teeth clenched and her body tensed and rigid. She was dead! She picked the child up to try to restore her, and found a scarf round her neck. It was not tied, but simply wound round, and even then not tightly. She flew to fetch the doctor, begging Jeanne, “take care of my darling. Don’t let anyone touch her.”

Jeanne nodded dumbly but spoke no word, sitting down beside the little corpse her hands motionless in her lap, her eyes fixed glassily on the still, lifeless face of her niece.

The doctor soon came and on removing the scarf noticed some marks upon the neck. “They look like bruises,” he remarked. Meanwhile Madame Pouche had come upon the scene to give what comfort she could to the distracted mother who, twice within ten days had suffered the greatest loss that can befall any mother.

Madame Pouche looked at the marks on the dead child’s neck. “Why—they are like those I saw on the throat of little Georgette,” she exclaimed, and her eyes turned accusingly in the direction of Jeanne. “They are finger

marks," she continued. "Somebody has killed the little ones."

The doctor pricked up his ears and asked the woman what she meant. Madame Pouche described what she had seen on the neck of Georgette just over a week before. The doctor examined the marks at closer range and then solemnly shook his head.

"I shall have to inform the police," he said.

Jeanne displayed not the least sign of alarm or even mild interest. She just stood there gazing down on the child with expressionless eyes.

The police were informed. The police surgeon came along and made an examination and—Suzanne followed her sister to the cemetery without a single enquiry being made or a single question put to Jeanne as to how the child had died.

This is perhaps one of the most amazing features of an amazing story. Two little girls, sisters, die suddenly in strangely suspicious circumstances in the presence of one person. Marks on the neck of the first babe suggest even to the lay mind of a kindly neighbour that death may not be due to natural causes. Similar marks on the neck of the second child emphasise this view of Madame Pouche. The doctor who examined the second child was not quite satisfied in his own mind and, refusing a death certificate left it for the police surgeon to decide. Apparently the latter was perfectly satisfied that there was no question of foul play, and so the way was left open for the murder of a third innocent.

Exactly a fortnight after the death of Suzanne, on March 25, Jeanne decided to go to lunch with her sister-in-law Madame Leon Weber. It is a remarkable thing how the circumstances of these crimes repeat themselves. They had just finished lunch, and Germaine—a babe of seven months—had been fed and placed in her cot when the mother suddenly remembered she had some shopping to do.

"Keep an eye on Germaine while I just slip round the corner," she remarked to Jeanne as she donned hat and coat. She had scarcely left the block of flats when her mother, who lived in the apartment above, heard piercing shrieks coming from the home of her daughter. She rushed down the stairs to find Germaine

struggling for breath, her little eyes bolting from her head. She snatched the child from the arms of Jeanne and took her upstairs where, under her tender ministrations Germaine quickly recovered.

When Madame Leon returned, she was naturally alarmed when she heard of the "fit" which had convulsed her baby, and thanked her mother for her prompt action in bringing her round. Germaine was now sleeping quietly, and was placed gently in her cot.

Jeanne, who did not seem unduly perturbed at what had happened, stayed on talking to Madame Leon, and then suddenly remembered that she wanted to buy some groceries. She asked her sister-in-law to do the necessary shopping because "her legs were bad and walking caused her much pain". Madame Leon did not make any demur, and set off at once on the errand leaving Germaine again alone with her aunt Jeanne.

Imagine her horror when, on returning home, she found her baby purple in the face, convulsed and apparently suffocating.

Her frenzied screams brought her mother and other neighbours to the scene and while the mother wrung her hands and Jeanne stood by motionless and expressionless, one of them ran for the doctor. He arrived within minutes and failed to discover any reason for the convulsions which had wracked the child. The only untoward thing was a suffusion of blood under the skin just above the left ear.

Germaine had once more lapsed into sleep, and the baffled doctor said he would call the next morning. He did so and found the baby quite recovered, the mark above her ear having disappeared.

Not long after the Doctor had left the flat Jeanne appeared on the scene full of solicitude for both baby and the mother. The latter appeared to find some solace in the company of Jeanne, and begged her to stay to lunch which she did. Again the mother fed her baby and put her to sleep in her cot. They sat talking for two or three hours and then—Jeanne asked her sister-in-law to go out on yet another errand for her because "her legs were bad." "I'll look after Germaine," she told Madame Leon, and the latter, heedless of her two previous experiences after leaving her baby in

charge of the aunt, went blithely off to do as she was asked.

She was soon back, but in the few minutes she had been away much had happened. As she entered the flat she saw her child writhing under the bedclothes of her cot, her aunt standing over her with her hands pressing on the baby's chest. In her anguish she seized the arm of Jeanne and pulled her away. But it was only with the greatest difficulty that she succeeded. Jeanne resisted with every ounce of her strength. The mother lifted Germaine onto her lap, and began to massage her. Slowly life returned to the baby, and she ceased her struggles for breath. Once more she drifted off to sleep, and once more Madame Leon placed her back into her cot and covered her with the bedclothes.

Jeanne uttered no word either of explanation or sorrow at what had happened. Nor did the fact that she and she alone had been with the little girl when she was seized with "fits," arouse the least suspicion in the mind of Madame Leon Weber. Within ten minutes of placing her sleeping baby in the cot, the mother and a neighbour went off together to get some salt and vinegar, again leaving Jeanne in the house alone with the sleeping Germaine.

On the face of it, and in view of all the preceding circumstances, this act would appear incredible to the point of lunacy. Even though no suspicion against Jeanne lurked in the mind of Madame Leon, it is difficult to understand how a mother could bear to leave her child again after what had happened within twenty-four hours. The fact is however, that she did, only to find on her return that Germaine had suffered "another seizure"—according to Jeanne—and had died.

That same night Marcel—Jeanne's own seven year old son—died from suffocation while sleeping with his mother. Four deaths within a month! All were children of the Weber family—and they had died in almost identical circumstances, Jeanne having been present on each occasion.

Was there ever a more staggering coincidence? But what is even more astonishing is the fact that still no suspicion appears to have entered the minds of any one of the family that Jeanne was responsible for these deaths. Instead, her relatives—including the

bereaved parents themselves—appeared to be filled with sympathy for the ordeals of this unhappy woman, who had also lost her own precious son Marcel, the only surviving child of the three she had borne.

They rallied round to help and comfort her in her dry-eyed grief, and so it was that on April 5—some ten days after the death of little Marcel, Madame Charles Weber with her ten months old son Maurice and accompanied by Madame Pierre Weber, called upon Jeanne who invited them to stay for lunch.

After the meal Jeanne remarked that her legs seemed to be getting worse instead of better. "I can't get about for the pain," she said, and then as though it was an afterthought, she went on, "I want a packet of needles to do some mending. I could have sent little Marcel if only he had been alive but . . . ." and she dabbed her eyes with a black-bordered handkerchief.

"I'll go and get them for you," volunteered Madame Charles Weber. "I know Maurice will be all right with you."

No sooner had she left than Jeanne turned to Madame Pierre. "Oh dear," she said, "I have run out of wine, and Marcel will be angry if he returns from work and there is nothing to drink. I wonder . . ." Without hesitation, Madame Pierre rose to her feet with a smile, saying, "I'll go and get a bottle for you Jeanne dear."

Out she went and immediately, Jeanne, now alone in the house with Maurice, crossed to the armchair in which the baby had been laid. For a moment she gazed down at him. Then . . . .

Madame Charles Weber was the first to get back, and when she did so she found her child in the throes of convulsions. His body was rigid, his face a purplish hue and his tongue was protruding.

Whether the long arm of coincidence had at last outstretched itself or whether some sudden intuition enlightened the mind of the mother, is not known. But tearing the immobile Jeanne from the side of her son, she cried out, "Miserable woman—he too is going to die before your eyes, like all the others."

Jeanne remained silent!

At that moment Madame Pierre returned and when she had partially recovered from the horror of what she saw, she rushed off to fetch a doctor. Very soon a Dr. Mack was on the scene, and what he found as a result of his examination of the child, was so disquieting that he sent the body of little Maurice to hospital for a post-mortem examination, to be carried out in his presence by Dr. Sevestre and M. Saillant. Dr. Mack had found a livid black mark on the neck of the child, and he suspected strangulation. The two hospital experts confirmed his findings and conclusions. To make things doubly sure, a police surgeon was called in, and in addition to the mark on the front of the neck he also found a bruise on the back of the neck which he declared was caused by pressure.

Jeanne was arrested and at once the wildest rumours began to circulate as the news of the deaths of the four Weber children became known to the public for the first time. Tongues began to wag, and it was recalled that two other little girls had died in Jeanne's arms in peculiar circumstances. They were Lucie Alexandre, two years of age, and Marcelle Poyatos aged ten months, both sisters, and the daughters of a neighbour.

We now enter upon that phase of the enquiry which reflects so little credit on the experts who were called in to examine the body of little Maurice Weber. M. Leydet was appointed *juge d'instruction*, and promptly ordered that Professor Thoinot of the Faculty of Medicine, Paris, should examine the body of the dead child. Professor Thoinot was considered to be one of the greatest pathologists in the world. But perhaps it is fair to say that the science of pathology had not reached the heights it attained in later years when our own Sir Bernard Spilsbury added such lustre to this branch of medicine. I cannot imagine that he would have come to the conclusions arrived at by Professor Thoinot, for the findings of the latter are as baffling as it is possible to imagine in view of subsequent developments.

He stated that the victim was healthy except for traces of a recent cough and bronchitis. Against the views of Drs. Sevestre Saillant and Mack, he stated that there were *no signs of strangulation and that in his opinion death was due to natural causes.*



DR. ZFO ZOE WILKINS  
(see *Vampire of Kansas City*)

PLATE IV



MARTHA HASEL WISE  
(see *She Loved Funerals*)

In view of this finding and of the suspicions surrounding the deaths of Georgette and Suzanne Weber, the *juge d'instruction* ordered that their bodies should be exhumed for examination by Thoinot. His findings are just as startling in these cases, as they were in the case of the boy Maurice. In the lungs of Georgette, he said he found a swollen abscess and some traces of the bacilli Koch—a tuberculous bacilli. In a dissected portion of Suzanne's neck he found a bruise caused during life. In neither case, declared the professor, could he state the actual cause of death, but—he *definitely scouted any suggestion of strangulation or murder.*

Maybe the evidence was too slight to say with certainty that murder had been done. But surely there was sufficient *prima facie* evidence that death *might* have occurred from other than natural causes. Particularly as he had—in connection with the boy Maurice—the evidence of Drs. Saillant, Sevestre and Mack that they had seen bruises upon the neck of this little victim.

Professor Thoinot was as dogmatic about these bruises as he was about everything else. "Those bruises never existed," he stated emphatically.

The *juge d'instruction* was still determined to probe this matter to the end, and two more doctors, Brouardel and Descouts were called in. They conferred with Thoinot and at length gave their decision. "The facts furnished by the autopsy and the witnesses do not prove death as the result of criminal violence."

When this finding was published in the Press it aroused public resentment on a large scale. Doubtless the tender age of the victims had something to do with the angry scenes which were witnessed on January 26, 1906 when Jeanne Weber appeared in the dock at the Seine Assizes to face a quadruple murder charge. On the way to and from the court, huge crowds assembled to hiss and clamour in strident voices, "Death to the Ogress." This was the first time that the sinister name had been applied to Jeanne Weber.

But what did the Weber family feel towards this woman who had been "in at the death" so to speak of five members of the family, including that of her own son? Strangely enough, although by now they must have been convinced of her guilt they went out

of their way to find excuses for her. They recalled the deaths of her first two children and said that she had been a prey to worry and despondency ever since. The tragedy had driven her mad, they suggested, and—in addition, she had sought refuge in drink and was now a confirmed drunkard. The loss of her own two little girls had so preyed on her mind that she could not bear to see other little children, nor tolerate the joy which other mothers experienced in the presence of their offspring.

One can perhaps understand the feelings of the Weber family concerning Jeanne. Nothing could ever bring back the babes they had lost. The death of their sister-in-law on the guillotine would only add to the miseries endured by the family. Would it not be better if she were found insane and sent to a mental home?

If things had turned out like this three other lives would have been saved. But as we shall see—through Professor Thoinot—it was not to be.

In view of what was told them by the relatives, the police authorities ordered two brain specialists to examine the accused woman. In their report Drs. Wallon and Dupre stated that they found the "language and attitude" of Jeanne Weber were "calm and lucid," but that she had suffered from "nervous disorders and hysteria as a result of mental disorders caused by the loss of her two children and certain gynecological troubles." Which meant that although suffering from some mental disturbance, Jeanne was by no means mad.

Three other mental specialists, Drs. Joffroy, Debuissou and Segalas, called for the defence, gave it as their opinion that as drunkenness had run in the Weber family for many generations, this had resulted in children of weak constitution with a tendency towards convulsions. The implication here being that all four children had died from natural causes.

A pale-faced and frail-looking woman, Jeanne sat in court listening to the battle of the experts. Only once did she appear to take any interest in the proceedings. That was when the grandmother of Germaine Weber embarked on a dramatic denunciation

of her while giving evidence. Marcel Weber the husband of Jeanne wept openly during this tirade.

Jeanne was defended by the great French advocate Maitre Henri-Robert. In reply to his question as to whether she was guilty of the murder of the four children, she replied in a sullen voice, "I did not kill them. Why should I?"

Skilfully Maitre Henri Robert cross-examined the various witnesses as they were called. There were eighteen medical experts in all, enough and more to confuse the minds of the jury with their differing opinions.

On the second day of the trial after an impassioned speech by defending counsel, Jeanne Weber was found "Not Guilty."

An amazing scene followed! The woman who had remained coldly unemotional throughout her grim ordeal, never evincing the slightest interest in what was going on around her, suddenly burst into a fit of frenzied weeping. She broke down completely and then—still trembling in a paroxysm of relief—she seized the hands of her counsel and pressed grateful passionate kisses upon them. Then she turned a defiant face towards her husband as she shouted out across the court, "I did not kill them—now say that you believe me." Marcel Weber clambered over forms and benches to reach his wife and clasped the weeping woman in his arms.

Meanwhile an extraordinary change had come over the public both inside and outside the court. Inside, pandemonium ensued as those who had been able to secure entrance to the proceedings tried to push their way to Jeanne with the intention of carrying her out shoulder high to the cheering crowd outside. The same crowd who, on her arrival at the court had hissed her and called her an Ogress.

Jeanne returned to her home with Marcel, but the enthusiasm which had greeted her acquittal gradually waned and ugly whispers made her sojourn in Paris intolerable. She left home and entered upon a nomadic existence, obtaining situations as a house-keeper with various families.

Fifteen months went by! In the April of 1907, she was house-

keeping in the home of M. and Madame Bavouzet who lived at Chambon with their three children, Germaine the eldest, Louise the second child, and Auguste a seven-year-old boy.

One night Louise went to Dr. Papazoglou and asked him to come at once as her little brother had been taken very ill. The boy had been to a wedding during the day and it was on arriving back that he was seized with violent convulsions and sickness.

When the doctor reached the house, he found the little boy already dead. By the bedside on which his body lay sat a gaunt, sallow-faced woman who immediately the doctor entered the room said, "Why did you not come sooner? You might have saved little Auguste—now he is dead."

The doctor retorted that he had come immediately he was summoned and then leaned over the boy. The first thing he observed was that the body had evidently been put into a clean nightgown.

"Yes," explained the woman. "He was sick and after he had passed away, I changed it."

The doctor then made a closer examination of the body and noticed a large bruise mark on the boy's neck. He knew that the woman was not Madame Bavouzet, and enquired, "Who are you?" "I am Madame Blaise" was the reply, "I am the sister of the boy's mother."

Dr. Papazoglou had no death certificate with him, and on leaving said he would send it round the next morning. Instead—he reported the bruise to the court of justice at Chateauxroix. The authorities at once ordered Dr. Audiat to make an examination of the dead child. This he did and found bruises on the neck, forehead, thighs and stomach of the boy. He made his report on the 22nd April, and on that very day it chanced that Germaine the elder sister of the dead boy, looking through some old papers which she found in the room of Madame Blaise, discovered a copy of the *Petit Journal* dated two years previously and containing a story about "The Ogress of Paris."

She straightaway went to the police, and it was not long ere housekeeper Blaise was identified as Jeanne Weber, and promptly arrested.

M. Belleau was appointed *juge d'instruction* and his first move was to invite Drs. Bruneau and Audiat to carry out an autopsy. Now one can understand the reluctance of expert medical men to state that death is due to violence when all the conditions they find are not conclusive on this point. But, in view of their knowledge that Jeanne Weber had already been placed on trial for four murders, one would have thought that their findings might have led them to more definite conclusions than those stated in their report. This said that although they had found signs of violence they could not say that these were a definite cause of death.

Needless to say M. Belleau could not leave the matter there and he instructed Professor Thoinot to make an examination. He did so and—as in previous cases—decided that Auguste's death was *not due to violence*. But still the *juge d'instruction* was not satisfied and called in two groups of experts to thrash the matter out. There were three from Paris, with Professor Thoinot at their head, and Drs. Papazoglou, Bruneau and Audiat from Chateauroux.

Both sides disagreed so fundamentally that once again the jury were confused, and with Maitre Henri-Robert again appearing for Jeanne Weber it only required him to plead that "a judicial error" had been committed for the case to be thrown out of court.

Thus, for the second time, and after being charged with the murder of six children, Jeanne Weber was again free to go where she willed.

The reaction of some people to crimes in general and murder in particular is beyond understanding. The central figure in a murder case after acquittal, is often inundated with proposals of marriage and offers of help from every direction. Soon after Jeanne had walked into freedom from the shadow of the guillotine, a M. Bougeau wellknown throughout France for his philanthropy got in touch with her. He felt that Jeanne had suffered much at the hands of fate, and that maybe she would find solace and consolation for the loss of her three offspring if she could be surrounded by other children. It so happened that he was largely responsible for running an infirmary at Fongombault where the aged and children could find refuge. He used his influence and

Jeanne was given the special job of tending and looking after the younger children in the institution.

Fifteen days later she was found standing at the bedside of a little girl with her hands clasped round the child's throat. Fortunately another attendant came on the scene before her purpose could be accomplished, and—Jeanne was forced to leave. Nothing came to light in the Press about this incident as every care was taken to keep the matter quiet.

So Jeanne made her way to Paris and there she called upon the chief of police, M. Hamard.

"I want to confess," she cried. "*I did* murder my three nieces and nephew. I choked them to death."

Now, M. Hamard realised that Jeanne had already been tried and acquitted on that charge and he could do nothing in regard to the Weber murders. The same thing did not apply to the death of Auguste Bavouzet. In that instance the case had been thrown out of court on the plea of her counsel that her trial was due to a "judicial error." She could be dealt with on that.

"What about the boy Bavouzet?" enquired M. Hamard.

But Jeanne was far too astute to fall into that trap.

"No!" she declared—"I did not murder Auguste."

So the chief of police shrugged his shoulders and told her to be off.

The next heard of Jeanne was at St. Remy where she fell in with a young workman named Emil Banchery. They travelled about the country together until they reached Commercy. There they put up at a local inn. The next day the man left, but Jeanne stayed on with M. and Madame Poirot who kept the inn. Their little six-year-old son was named Marcel. Again the coincidence of names.

That night the two women chatted together in the parlour, and Jeanne confided to Madame Poirot that her "husband" was so jealous of her that he could not bear her to sleep alone. "Whenever I visit any of my sisters without him, he always insists that one of the children sleep with me." Then she began to weep, the tears rolling down her cheeks. "If only I had a child with me, it would be all right," she said.

The obliging Madame Poirot came to the rescue. "Why not have my little boy with you while you are here?" she suggested, and smilingly the woman with the "jealous husband" thanked her landlady. Marcel Poirot was transferred from his own small bed to that of Jeanne Weber. "I will see that he sleeps well," she told his mother.

In the middle of the night a Madame Curlet who was also staying at the inn, heard strange noises. Opening her bedroom door she realised that the strangled groans were coming from Jeanne's room. She crossed quickly and flung open the door. A shocking sight met her eyes. Lying on the bed with Jeanne bending over him was the little boy. Blood was streaming from his mouth, his face was almost black. Three bloodstained twisted handkerchiefs hung over the edge of the bed.

Madame Curlet's screams brought the landlord and his wife running to the scene, and together they pulled Jeanne—her face now distorted with frenzy, her hands and arms smothered with blood—away from their son. It transpired that not only had she strangled the boy, but before doing so had bitten his tongue out.

It needs no stretch of the imagination to understand the sort of outcry there was when it became known that the Ogress had claimed yet another little victim. Again the crowd cried "Death to the Ogress." And this time there was no escape from the verdict of guilty brought against her when at length she came to trial.

But Jeanne was not destined to die upon the guillotine. For the experts stepped in once more. Professors Paris and Lataue, two of the greatest brain specialists in Paris, declared her to be insane and she was sent to Marevale asylum. There are few who will quarrel with their findings although the enormity of her crimes is so great that Jeanne Weber must be included among the world's worst women.

It is interesting to reflect on the various opinions expressed in the case of Jeanne Weber, she will always remain one of the outstanding examples of a perversion instinct in which passion was combined with cruelty.

Dr. Berillon an inspector of asylums thought it possible that

Jeanne Weber was hypnotised into committing her last murder by the reports in the newspapers. He was supported by such eminent men as Dr. Voison of the Saltpetiere, Dr. Dupre, head of the Police Infirmary, and Professor Thoinot, of whom we have already heard much.

I am inclined to agree with Dr. Labelle who was called in to examine the body of Suzanne, the second victim to die at the hands of Jeanne. "Had they called me to give evidence on the first occasion" he stated, "the further crimes would have been impossible."

I also think that if the police had taken a greater interest in the deaths of Georgette and Suzanne Weber, the five other victims who followed would have been saved. And certainly if due notice had been given to what Drs. Sevestre and Saillant found in the case of Germaine Weber, at least four children would have been saved from an agonising death.

And what of Jeanne herself?

Whether she became a prey to remorse and terror once she was removed to the solitude of her iron-barred room at Marevale, or whether it was just the progression of her disease of mind, I do not pretend to know nor do the records say. But her death was perhaps more terrible than that she meted out to her victims.

She became subject to fits during which she clawed the air as though clutching at imaginary throats. She foamed at the mouth giving vent to hideous wails of horror. Then—one morning she was found dead, the long talons of her fingers grasping her own neck in a grip of death.

### III

## BÉHEADED\* IN BRIDAL ARRAY

USHERED to the headsman's block in a gown of shimmering white as though going to her wedding instead of to a shameful death, Grete Beier, the 23-year-old daughter of an ex-Burgomaster of Brand, in Saxony, was beheaded on the stroke of midnight. She had been sentenced to death for the murder of a lover in circumstances of deliberation and callousness never probably surpassed by so young a felon, — circumstances which sent a thrill of horror through the public as the details of her crime unfolded at her trial.

I suppose Grete was what, in these enlightened days, we should call a "juvenile delinquent," for the lurid career of crime and passion on which she embarked began before she reached the age of sixteen. While still at school, she indulged in so many amorous escapades with the elder boys, that the schoolmaster had to appeal to her father, the worthy Burgomaster, to use what influence he had to prevent his daughter from demoralising her fellow pupils.

The trouble was that Grete was blessed—or you may think cursed—with a beauty that blossomed with the years. From her earliest days she had the face of an angel, from which large expressive eyes gazed with a serenity and innocence that belied the devil within her. Demure and soulful of mien, she was soft of speech and gentle in manner. She was too, as beautiful in form as she was in feature, and—as evil as she was lovely.

Herr Beier, her respected father was helpless where his wayward daughter was concerned, Nor was he helped in the upbringing of Grete by his wife, who was not merely lacking in all motherly concern for the wellbeing of her daughter, but actually encouraged Grete's bad ways and connived at her wrong-doing.

While at school Grete had stuck at nothing to indulge her craze for pleasure. She stole money from her father so that she could lavish presents upon her boy lover of the moment. She played off one youthful swain against another, goading them through jealousy, to pander to her wants.

On leaving school her father hoped that she would settle down in some respectable job which would occupy her mind and so distract her attention from the mode of life she appeared to enjoy.

Maybe she would have done but for the evil influence of her mother, who at that time happened to get in with a man named Merker, whom she had met casually while on a bout of drinking. Merker appeared to have plenty of money and spent it freely upon Frau Beier. The latter thinking that it would be nice to have a wealthy man in the family, decided to bring Grete along. The man could hardly fail to fall in love with her lovely daughter she argued, and, if marriage ensued she—the mother—would have a ready source of cash with which to indulge in her carousals.

So Grete was introduced to Merker, and, as Frau Beier anticipated, the man fell passionately in love with her. Grete reciprocated his ardour. But despite his passion for the young beauty, Merker was not interested in marriage. Instead he persuaded Grete to engage in an affair with him, and she was so desperately in love with this man who could give her the luxury for which she craved, that she was ready to fall in with anything he suggested. Grete had just passed her sixteenth birthday. Merker took a flat in Brand where the girl visited him in secret. Sometimes she would stay the night taking the precaution to telephone her mother to say that she was staying with a girl friend. The mother was fully aware of what was going on and it had her entire approval—so long as she was kept well supplied with money.

But neither Grete nor her mother would have been quite so complacent perhaps had they known that Merker was a forger and swindler who had just brought off a big coup and decided that Brand would provide a nice little hiding place from the police till things blew over, nor did they dream that the money

he was spending so lavishly was dwindling more rapidly than he had intended.

It was not long before the liaison brought about its almost inevitable consequences. Grete discovered she was going to have a baby, confided the news to her mother who promptly advised her, "Get rid of it." This Grete attempted to do without success. The baby was born, not a soul in Brand becoming aware that Fraulein Beier was anything but the demure and well-conducted young lady she appeared to be. Only the mother knew of her daughter's plight, and only she and Merker knew that it was Grete who callously smothered her new-born babe and disposed of its innocent but unwanted body.

So—only just turned seventeen—Grete Beier committed her first murder. First I said, because throughout the six years which followed during which she remained under the spell of her lover Merker, two more children were born to her and she "got rid" of them in exactly the same way.

But many things were to happen in the meantime. The proceeds of Merker's forgery had vanished, and instead of the sumptuous flat to which he had first taken his sweetheart, they had to be content with the more modest rendezvous of a single furnished room, and instead of his spending money upon her, he was now incessantly demanding money from the girl. "I don't care how you get it but—get it," was his cry, adding "If you don't—I'm off."

Loth to lose her lover even though she now realised how he had deceived her, Grete resorted to every means to supply Merker with money. Previously it was she who had called the tune while others danced to her piping. Now it was Merker who made her do his bidding. Still as beautiful as ever, over-developed physically, but under-developed morally, Grete used her charms to ensnare well-to-do merchants and residents of Brand and the surrounding areas. For all they knew she was single without any man friend, free to accept their attentions. The girl played upon their susceptibilities by pretending to be in love, and—succeeded in obtaining from them sums of money which she at once handed to Merker.

One day when they met in their little love nest in the outer reaches of the town Merker looked pale and anxious.

"What is the matter my darling," enquired the solicitous Grete.

"I must have some money and I must have it soon," was Merker's reply. "If I don't—it means prison—and I don't mean to see the inside of a gaol again."

"You shan't," cooed Grete as she flung her arms around her lover. "I'll get it for you somehow—I don't quite know how yet, but—leave it to me."

That night she bethought her of a small safe which belonged to her father. It was a safe in which he kept the few valuables remaining to him since his wife had developed her spendthrift ways. Grete recalled that a few weeks before, a well-known inhabitant of Brand had handed to her father for safe keeping, a large amount of jewellery, and a bankbook containing entries recording his life's savings.

She went to her mother the next morning.

"I want the key of father's safe", she said.

"What for?" enquired her mother.

"Never mind what for. I want it, and you shall have a nice present for your trouble."

The key was forthcoming and the safe was robbed of its contents. The jewellery and the bankbook were taken to Merker who promptly disposed of the former and then set to work on the bankbook. A skilled forger, it did not take him long to copy the name of the man who owned the account. Every penny was withdrawn!

In the meantime Grete, to cover up her tracks had a duplicate key of the safe made, and arranged with her mother that it should be secreted in the house of a woman friend of the latter. Grete and her mother made a friendly call upon this woman, and, while she was out of the room Grete cunningly secreted the key at the back of the drawer in a little-used occasional table.

The scene was now set! It did not matter how soon or how long it might be before the theft from the safe was discovered, the trail had been laid to direct suspicion towards the woman with

whom both Grete and her mother had innocently taken tea that afternoon.

Actually it was some weeks before Herr Beier had occasion to go to the safe and found it empty. And then—his wife made the startling announcement that she had seen her woman friend fiddling about near the safe, and that if her house was searched, a clue would probably be found.

When the police went to investigate, there, sure enough in the table drawer where Grete had placed it, was the duplicate key. The woman was arrested and charged. But even the best laid schemes sometimes go awry, and it was so in this case. Both Grete and her mother were unaware that when they manœuvred the woman out of the parlour on the day of the tea-party, a serving maid happened to be looking through the service hatch in the kitchen and saw Grete hide the key. She attached no importance to the incident until the arrest of her mistress. Then she remembered what she had seen, and at once told the police.

It was Grete who now faced the charge of robbing her own father. The latter collapsed and almost died when he learned of his daughter's crime, especially when he realised that his wife had taken part in the plot to rob the safe even to sharing in the proceeds. Frau Beier was not in the least perturbed. As for Grete—she displayed neither shame nor remorse at having been found out in this wicked scheme not only to rob her own father, but to shift the blame onto the innocent friend of her mother. Far from being repentant indeed, while awaiting trial on the charge of theft, she conceived another plan by which she hoped to thwart justice. A plot with murderous intent.

She tried to smuggle out of prison a note to Merker in the hem of a blouse which she was sending home to her mother to be washed. At that time there was nothing to implicate her lover, and Grete was determined to shield him to the end. In this note she told him to go to the house of the girl who had seen her secrete the key, chloroform her and then choke her to death so that she could not give evidence. Fortunately for this girl the note was discovered with the result that a further charge was then

made against Grete—the more serious charge of “incitement to murder.”

No longer could her affair with the forger be concealed, and in addition to her terrible plight, Grete now suffered the anguish of learning that her lover had, with more discretion than valour, fled the scene leaving her to bear the full brunt of the charges.

At her trial Grete appeared sad and demure. She tried to use her loveliness to the greatest effect. It availed her nothing however, and she was sent to prison for five years. Because of her youth and because she was of such good behaviour while in prison, she was released long before she had completed her term. The officers reported that she was a changed girl; that she truly repented her evil ways, and had expressed the intention of leading a devoutly religious life when she had expiated her crime. Sweet-faced nuns who visited her in gaol, corroborated these statements and expressed the view that Grete was now a reformed character who would become a respectable member of society once she regained her freedom. One would have thought that the salutary lesson she had received would have shown Grete the error of her ways, and—for a time, at least, it appeared as though it had. She returned home a chastened and apparently repentant girl and her father took her to his heart once more. He had resigned his office of Burgomaster, and had moved away to Chemnitz.

Not long after her release, Grete became friendly with a young and ambitious engineer who was making rapid progress in his profession. His name was Pressler, and he knew nothing of the girl's record. Her soulful beauty captivated him completely and he asked the Burgomaster's permission to marry Grete. The father was overjoyed! He fondly imagined that his daughter would now find happiness in the love of a good man and settle down to a useful domestic life. Grete too appeared to be quite willing, and preparations went ahead for the wedding.

Before the date fixed for the marriage however, her ex-lover Merker appeared on the scene. He had heard of her release and run her to earth at Chemnitz after many weeks of search. He laid

in wait for her so that no-one should know of his return. And the girl? . . . from the moment she set eyes on her evil genius she was lost. All the old passion returned in full force and her one concern was to rid herself of Pressler and throw in her lot with Merker, but not until she had secured for herself the small fortune which she knew her fiancé possessed.

Now, more than ever, she pretended a wild passion for her husband-to-be. He was overwhelmed with her love and sweetness, yet all the time she was secretly continuing her intimacy with Merker. He had taken an apartment on the outskirts of Chemnitz and here he awaited the calls of the infatuated Gräte.

Always he pressed her for money, and again the girl resorted to every ruse to satisfy his demands. She conceived the idea of forging the will of an old bachelor uncle who was at death's door.

With hypocritical pretence she paid this uncle regular visits, sitting with him for hours and ministering to his every need with loving tenderness. There was no difficulty about obtaining samples of the old man's handwriting or of his signature. These she took to her lover who with considerable artistry forged a will in which the uncle left everything to his "beloved niece Grete Beier."

The old man lingered on however, and although in due course Grete—and through her, Merker—would come into a substantial inheritance, the latter was impatient. He was in urgent need of money. It was the same old cry, the same old threat. "Money or—I leave you."

Grete was driven to distraction. At first she thought of murdering her uncle but was deterred by Merker who pointed out that the finger of suspicion would inevitably be directed against her because of her past record. With more directness than subtlety he remarked, "You will end up on the guillotine and I—shall have no money."

Grete racked her brains for inspiration, and while tossing restlessly in bed one night, she hit upon another scheme. If she could stage the death of Pressler so that it looked like suicide, she thought, no suspicion would attach to her and she would inherit

his money. You may wonder how she could be sure of the latter. But Grete was leaving nothing to chance. With diabolical ingenuity she worked out a plot for murdering Pressler in cold blood. Every day since their first meeting, he had written passionate love notes. Now she set herself out to incite his pen to write her even more burning love letters. As each one arrived she carefully copied it word for word, imitating the writing of her lover as closely as she could. Then she destroyed the originals keeping only the copies under lock and key ready for production at the crucial moment.

It was not long before she could reproduce Pressler's handwriting with comparative ease, and so accurately as to be almost indistinguishable from the real. With infinite cunning she chose the day for her crime, the day of an annual fair being held in an outlying village. Grete had made her plans with detailed precision. She attended the fair with a number of young men and women friends, a light-hearted sprite with no hint in her demeanour of the terrible deed she was about to do. She exchanged banter with her companions and entered into every jollification with zest. But there was murder in her heart, and behind her mask of carefree innocence lay the ruthless determination to get money for her impatient lover Merker. ✓ • •

Towards late afternoon she made excuses to her friends that she must leave them, but would be back later in the evening. "I promised to go home because my uncle is arriving from Paris and my father has asked me to prepare a meal for them," she explained.

There was not a word of truth in her story. •

"I'll be back for the fun at Frieberg this evening," she added as she left them and made for Chemnitz where she was to meet Pressler.

In the pocket of her jacket was a small pistol and a phial of cyanide. She entered her lover's flat and tidied up the room. Presently her fiancé joined her and took her in his arms. She returned his kisses with passion, and then went on to say that she had returned especially early from the fair so that she could spend more time with him. Pressler was enraptured.

"Marry me Grete", he pleaded, "I want you so much."

"And I want you—" declared the girl, "so much that I promise you we will be wed before the month is out."

In a frenzy of joy Pressler pulled Grete down onto his knee, smothering her with kisses.

"I've brought you a little present from the fair", she told him as her arms enfolded him, "But first you must close your eyes and see if you can guess what it is."

Obediently Pressler closed his eyes. The girl took his own handkerchief and bound it round his eyes. "To make sure you cannot see," she explained.

For a moment she rose from his knee. The man's groping arms reached out to pull her back. His lips opened to utter some endearing words, and in that second Grete pushed the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth and pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced his brain and Pressler slumped forward in his chair—dead.

For the next hour Grete was busy ! At the very table where her lover lay dead, she concocted a combined letter and will, in which she made it appear that Pressler had committed suicide, leaving her all his money. Then, amongst the papers of the dead man, she carefully placed another letter—in different handwriting—purporting to have come from an Italian woman claiming to be his wife. In this concoction of Grete's the supposed writer was made to say that she had deliberately attached herself to Pressler in order to avenge her sister whom he had seduced and abandoned. She had induced him to marry her and then left him at the altar, biding her time to wreak her full revenge. Having learned of his engagement to Grete, the letter went on to say, she realised that the moment had come, and she offered him the alternatives of—a charge of bigamy if he married Grete, or suicide.

Such a letter not only allayed any suspicion of foul play, but also appeared to provide a motive for Pressler taking his own life.

Her two documents carefully planted, Grete took train to Friburg where, once more she became the belle of the party. Not a cloud of anxiety or sorrow marred the beautiful brow of this girl who threw herself into every enjoyment that offered itself

that night. In fact, so happy was she that she telephoned her mother to say she was having a good time and would not be returning home till the morrow.

That night she spent in the arms of Merker to whom she confided nothing of the terrible crime she had committed only a few hours before.

The next morning Pressler's body was discovered. Grete appeared prostrated with grief when the news was brought to her. She donned the deepest mourning, and at the graveside of her fiancé, she presented a sorrowing and pathetic figure as she sobbed with anguish at her loss. Everything went according to plan. The money of the dead man—several hundred pounds—was handed over to Grete in accordance with the will she had forged.

And now, spurred on perhaps by her success in this instance, she began to pay solicitous attention to her bachelor uncle once more. One can guess what would have happened to him if Nemesis had not overtaken his thoughtful niece.

A brother of Pressler observed certain peculiarities about the phrasing of the "last will and testament" of the dead man.

Not only were there phrases which the latter would have been unlikely to use, but they revealed a strange ignorance of his own family affairs. So the brother instituted enquiries, and produced genuine signatures and genuine handwriting of the dead man. Grete was closely questioned. As evidence of the genuineness of the will she produced the letters from Pressler which she had so carefully copied. Compared with his actual handwriting, however, there were differences which not even her studied skill had overcome. Nor could she explain the errors she had made regarding his family, errors of which Pressler could hardly have been guilty.

Then it was revealed that the letter from the supposed "wife", although written in a disguised hand, bore many characteristics of Grete's own handwriting. She was arrested and charged with the murder of her fiancé.

Stricken with grief at the calamity which had fallen upon him, Grete's father had a stroke and died, cursing his daughter with his

dying breath. And once again the despicable Merker disappeared leaving Grete to face her trial alone.

In court she made what can only be described as a cold-blooded confession of her crime. First she told the story of her life, consisting largely of a long recital of love affairs. Then she related how she had become the slave of Merker and had borne him three children.

"I killed them all as soon as they were born", she told the horrified court. "We didn't want children—we wanted a good time." She had never wanted to wed Pressler, she declared, and her object in killing him was to get back to favour with Merker. Grete calmly went on to describe how she blindfolded the unsuspecting Pressler and then shot him. A little later on however she gave an amended version of the death scene. It was none the less gruesome or revolting in its callous details. She said :-

"At Chemnitz, Pressler met me at the station. He had bought cakes, and we went straight to his rooms, where he asked me to make coffee while he fetched cream which he knew I liked. Then we drank coffee together. I could not put the poison in the coffee, as I drank that myself as well. Therefore I had to leave it to chance.

"Pressler was moreover very attentive and after the coffee he invited me to drink a glass of egg cognac. I refused, whereupon he said I might, at any rate, pour out a glass for him. I did so, and quickly let the poison drop into it. Then I stirred it several times with a spoon, which in my excitement I very nearly put to my lips. But I remembered in time.

"Meanwhile, Pressler sat to one side on a lounge chair. I went up to him and he was aggressive, and tried to draw me on to his lap. He was very passionate, and his face was so distorted that it filled me with disgust and horror. Not quite knowing what I did, I reached him the cognac, and said, "Here, drink." He took the glass, and emptied it at one draught. He had hardly put it down before he fell over.

"What next happened I retain only dimly in my memory. What followed I did mechanically. I did not believe that Pressler was dead. I thought that he would come round again and would then

have dreadful pains. So I took a serviette, tied it round his head—why I do not know, for his eyes were shut—placed the revolver right into his mouth, which was open and pressed the trigger.”

All this was related in the most calm and matter of fact tones as though she were telling a bed-time story to children. Asked by the President of the court whether she ever felt any remorse for what she had done, Grete replied without the least emotion, “At the funeral when the coffin disappeared I felt sorry.” That was all !

Found guilty she was sentenced to death, and there is something ironic in the addition to the formal sentence that she would also suffer “permanent loss of civil rights.”

Macabre and somewhat appalling was the pomp which surrounded the subsequent beheading of Grete Beier. Saxon law demanded that she should be beheaded by a Saxon-born man garbed in full evening dress even to a spotless white tie. The same law insisted that the weapon of execution should be a two-handed sword and that only one blow must be struck. The blow must fall “between dark and dawn”, it was ordered; hence the midnight beheading.

Max Ulmfield, a Dresden butcher was engaged for the execution ; a brawny man, heavy of build. On the night of the beheading he arrived at the gaol with four assistants all attired in sombre black except for the dazzling whiteness of their shirt-fronts, collars and bows.

It was the custom then—in the year 1908—to keep a condemned person in ignorance of the exact date of execution. Thus it was that on the stroke of midnight Grete Beier was called from the bed where she was sleeping, not knowing that her doom was set for this particular night. The prison matron brought her a white dress of exquisite material provided by the State. It was cut very low in the neck and the thoughtful gaoler had provided a waterproof bib to protect the waist from spatters of blood.

Two men conducted the young girl, who neither trembled nor paled, to the prison-court, the walls of which were draped in black to the height of one storey.

An altar, hung also in black, and a gleaming white crucifix

stood at one end, and beside it a priest. Grete was conducted past the priest and the witness-stand, holding a dozen people, including one newspaper man, to the great black desk beyond. Here sat the judge who had passed sentence, and the States Attorney who prosecuted her for the murder of her lover.

The judge arose, read the law and the sentence of death, and stated that the King—yes! there was a King of Saxony in those days—had declined to grant pardon, and directed that the sentence be carried out forthwith. The priest stepped forward with the crucifix, and exhorted her to repentance.

Grete sighed and said : “Yes, I regret it.”

At once, she was turned about and led by the four deputy executioners in their frock coats, to the death-block, a huge piece of solid oak with a groove cut to fit the neck. On one side was a cushion, on which she was made to kneel. Her arms were strapped to the block, and she gazed into a bucket, placed to catch her head when it should fall. Beside her lay an open coffin.

The black masked executioner, the muscles of his arms rippling beneath the sleeves of his dress coat, stepped forward. He spat on his hands, rubbed them on the knees of his trousers, then carefully gripped the two-handed sword.

For a brief moment he held it lightly above the neck of the kneeling girl, and then there was a swish as he swung it like an axe, rising to his toes so as to get the full weight of his body behind the blow. The weapon struck true! The sentence had been fulfilled in one blow.

Thus did Grete Beier pay the penalty of all her crimes, her only requiem being the sound of steel upon wood.

If moral there be to this story it is simply this : Grete was a “good-time” girl of surpassing loveliness. But, although her beauty was only skin deep in outward appearance, it had gone to her very soul like some cancerous growth, and destroyed all the inner beauty of which she may ever have been possessed.

## IV

### BLUEBEARD IN SKIRTS

**I**N the early dawn of one spring morning in 1908 the inhabitants of the peaceful little township of La Porte in the State of Indiana were aroused from their slumbers by an angry red glow in the distant sky.

From the way in which it flickered, growing first bright and then gradually waning, only to burst out once more into further brilliance, it was obvious that a fire was in progress, and a fierce fire at that. The conflagration appeared to be somewhere in the region of a farm on the outskirts of the town, a farm owned by a widow Belle Guinness who lived there with her three children.

A fire is ever an intriguing spectacle, and a few of the people of La Porte were sufficiently curious to get out of bed, harness their ponies, get into their traps and drive off to the blaze. And what a blaze it was! The farmhouse and its outbuildings crackled and glowed with greedy zest. Now and again as the roofs fell in, sparks flew up into the heavens like some gigantic firework display. The firemen were helpless against the consuming lust of the flames which, in a short time left nothing but the skeletons of what had once been fine buildings.

"Where were Belle Guinness and her children?"

That was the question on every lip as the fire fighters toiled, and the police marshalled the onlookers who had been drawn to the scene. It was a question that was to receive a grim and macabre answer.

When the fire had burned itself out and daylight had come, police and firemen began raking over the debris. Suddenly there was a cry as they came across the charred bodies of three children and the headless trunk of a woman.

This tragic find aroused no suspicion of foul play. Why should it? The fire itself was sufficient to account for the death of the victims, even though the head of the woman had not yet been found. It was not until later, when the usual curiosity mongers appeared on the scene that one of the most fiendish mass murders in the annals of crime was brought to light, branding Belle Gunness as a veritable Bluebeard in Skirts.

The searchers were haphazardly turning over the charred remains of the farmhouse with sticks and other implements, when, to their horror, they turned up the body of a man. It lay in what was obviously a grave and was stripped of every vestige of clothing. The police immediately went into action and it was not long before they dug up the body of Jeanie Olsen, a sixteen-year-old girl whom Gunness had adopted in childhood, and who, it transpired, had not been seen about the place since September 1906. It was clear from the condition of the girl's body that she had been brutally murdered. And when still later, the bodies of four men and another woman were unearthed lying almost side by side in this farmhouse graveyard, the wholesale nature of Belle's crimes became manifest.

Suddenly this hitherto peaceful spot became the focal point of tremendous events, and morbid minded folk. As the digging operations continued, bringing more and more bodies to light, the neighbourhood was invaded by thousands of men, women, and children, who rushed hither and thither to drink their fill of the gruesome tragedy. The derelict homestead with yawning holes marking the graves of the various victims, was visited by over thirty thousand people in one day. Every ramshackle trap and vehicle for miles around was pressed into service to carry excursionists to the scene, and horses were hitched to every tree around the farm. Whole families strolled about the place like so many sightseers on vacation, while enterprising hawkers sold picture postcards of the spot with a photograph of Belle Gunness inset. The barrow-boys of that day did a roaring trade in girdle cakes, hot dogs, peanuts, lemonade and ice cream.

The visitors listened enthralled to old Dan Hudson the farm

servant who had helped dig up the bodies, and who now, with an eye to business, harangued the crowds as he stood on a pile of smoke-blackened ruins. "'Tis a turrible thing", said this rural celebrity, "how she pulled those poor fellars on. D'you mind how she allus started writin' about business. That sounded kind-a sensible. A'int that jest the kind of bait to catch such fellars like Heldgren—'im wot I dug up with me own hands? Then, after she gets 'em cornin' for the farm, she springs that love business. Course—she's a sight to stop a wheel barrow, but wouldn't one of these old fellars think it'd be easy fer to marry that 150,000 dollars as she advertised she were worth?"

From which it may be gathered that Mr. Hudson had no great notion of the beauty of his mistress, but considerable regard for her business acumen. It was a fact that Belle was not prepossessing, and her allure for the opposite sex was not due to her physical charms. Her hair was scanty, and her eyes which looked out from beneath a low receding brow, were small. She had a large nose while her lips were thin, rather cruel looking. Which is not to be wondered at when one realises that over twenty unsuspecting victims found their way to the picturesque farmhouse at La Porte never again to be seen alive. Belle simply murdered them in rapid succession, dismembered their bodies and buried the mutilated remains in the garden which surrounded the house.

Before we delve further into the ghastly details of her crimes, let us get a little closer acquainted with the intriguing Belle. She was born Belle Paulsen, and was the daughter of a Norwegian who had migrated to the States where he had a business in Chicago. In 1884, she married Max Torenson by whom she had three children.

It was not long after the birth of the third child that her husband died very suddenly after supper one night, leaving his wife the richer by some thousands of pounds which she received from various insurance companies with which he had insured his life.

In view of subsequent happenings one is entitled to wonder whether the death of husband Max was quite as free from the help of his wife as was thought at the time. Not long after his death, Belle married again, this time to a Mr. Gunness who was several

years older than his bride, but in a good way of business. By some freak of coincidence let us say, this romance also had a tragic termination for within a few months of leading the buxom Belle to the altar, Mr. Gunness died under what may be described as *peculiar* circumstances.

A heavy knife, which Belle used for chopping meat, had fallen on his head killing him outright. Belle was inconsolable and donned the deepest mourning, as did her three children. Maybe her grief was assuaged to some extent by the fact that husband number two—like husband number one—was heavily insured, as likewise were two houses which the dead man left to her in his will. When the dwellings were mysteriously burnt to the ground within a month of his demise, still more dollars accrued from the insurance companies.

Thus Belle was reasonably well off through the deaths of her two husbands, but instead of money being her servant it was fast becoming her master. The lust for more riches seized her, and it was this insensate craving which led her to embark on a career of wholesale murder.

With her children and the little adopted girl Jennie Olsen, she moved out to Indiana and took the farm at La Porte. She felt that this quiet little town was the very place to carry out the scheme she had in mind.

She began operations by inserting simple little advertisements in selected newspapers. Whatever Belle lacked in culture and refinement, she made up for in her understanding of male psychology. Her advertisements appealed through their very artlessness.

"Rich, good-looking woman, owner of a big farm, desires to correspond with a gentleman of wealth and refinement. Object matrimony."

Judging by the number of bodies found in the garden of "Murder Farm", as it became known, suitors for the hand of the matrimonially inclined Belle were numerous. They visited her in a constant stream, and in each case it was apparently a cash down transaction. The amazing thing is that, although five well-known men holding responsible positions, disappeared and were never

heard of again after visiting Belle, no suspicions were aroused. When neighbours casually enquired what had become of Mr. "so-and-so", Mrs. Gunness explained that he had gone to San Francisco, or to New York. Man after man stuffed his pockets with banknotes and gold and betook him to the little farm which he found so cosy—so cosy indeed that he never left it.

In the letters to her prospective bridegrooms, Belle always insisted on an interview at her home, and it speaks well for her literary and other abilities that only one of the many would-be-husbands of this widow of death ever escaped after entering the trap at La Porte. The fortunate man, was George Busby and when the exploits of Belle were revealed, he handed to the Sheriff a bundle of letters which he had once received from the enterprising murderess. He also described how on the day following his arrival Belle asked him how much money he possessed. When he told her he had only a few hundred dollars in cash, but a large farm, she advised him to sell the farm and come to settle down with her.

"We will be married right away", she purred. "I have never loved any man as I love you."

Thus inspired Busby returned home, sold his farm outright, and with the proceeds set out to rejoin his bride-to-be. Arrived at La Porte he crept silently round to the side door of the house intending to give his fiancé a pleasant surprise, but it was he who received the surprise, for as he passed a window he was shocked to see Belle locked fast in the arms of Ray Lamphere.

The outraged Busby knocked sharply on the door and Lamphere vanished by some back way. Loving greetings and passionate caresses greeted Busby, but by this time his ardour was cooled. He told Gunness that he had been unable to sell his farm, and had only £50. For a few moments the woman raged and stormed at him, and then, deciding that £50 was better than nothing, she escorted him to the bedroom where he was to sleep.

Busby decided that he would be up early and leave the farm the very next morning. In the middle of the night he was awakened by a feeling that there was someone in the room. A sickly sweet smell pervaded the air, while in the dim light from the moon, he could

discern the shadowy figure of a woman bending over him. He threw back the bedclothes and snatched at the night-dress of his visitor who turned and fled slamming the door behind her and locking it from the outside. At daybreak the next morning Busby left the farm.

He could count himself extremely lucky. Others were not so fortunate as for example Mr. John Moo, who came hot-foot to the farm with £220 which he had drawn from his bank. He was heard of no more ! Then there was Olaf Butsberg who succumbed to the lure of a newspaper advertisement and after entering into some correspondence with Belle; withdrew a large sum of money with which he went blithely to La Porte and—to his death.

There was the man Andrew Heldgren—referred to by old Dan Hudson who claimed to have “dug ’im up with me own hands.” Andrew was one of those who replied to the matrimonial bait held out by Belle in her advertisements, and a number of letters passed between the two, the woman gradually pretending that she had been completely captivated by the affection expressed in the letters Heldgren had written her. Her own epistles became more and more loving. She wrote one beginning :—

“To the dearest friend in the world,” and after many warm passages, she concluded, “My heart beats in wild rapture for you, my Andrew. Come to me soon. Come prepared to stay with me for ever for I love you. . . .” That “for ever” was ominous.

A few days after Heldgren received this letter, neighbours of Belle Gunness saw a dapple grey horse and trap coming up the lane. Sitting beside Belle in the trap was a stout middle-aged man. It was Andrew Heldgren on his way to his doom !

It was thought at first that the headless trunk which was found immediately after the fire at the farm, was another victim of Belle and that she had deliberately set fire to her home and fled the scene of her crimes. A hue and cry was raised and her picture was published in every newspaper throughout the States, with a request that information should be given to the police if anyone saw her.

But further investigations proved that the charred body was none other than that of Mrs. Gunness herself. A ring found on one of the fingers was identified by her sister as one belonging to Belle. The medical evidence also showed that the head had been severed from the body with some sharp instrument, but there was no sign of the missing head. It was obvious that the dead woman could not have cut off her own head and clearly she must have met her death at the hands of some other person. But who? Suspicion was directed towards Ray Lamphere a carpenter in the employ of Belle. It happened that on the night of the fire, a neighbour saw Lamphere coming directly from the farm while the glare from the blazing buildings was rivalling the glow of dawn.

Ray was questioned and—arrested on a charge of arson. It was a gruesome and terrible story he told the police of how he had become the lover of the dead woman, and witnessed the burial of at least one of the victims of his mistress.

"Mrs. Gunness made me a proposal of marriage", he said, "and after we had become lovers, she said that before the ceremony was performed I must insure my life. This I did, making a will in her favour. But somehow, once she got the will, she kept postponing the marriage."

"Then, one day I found a strange man in the house. It was Andrew Heldgren. They thought themselves alone, but I overheard my mistress say that she was tired of having Lamphere around and intended to get rid of him."

"Late one afternoon she sent me to the station to meet her cousin a Mr. Moo. She told me that if he did not arrive I was to stay in town overnight. I met the train at Michigan City but there was no Mr. Moo on it. I knew then that Mrs. Gunness had concocted the story to get me out of the way.

"I at once returned to La Porte, and when it was getting near midnight I stole out to the farm. In the yellow light from a stable lamp I saw Mrs. Gunness bending over a hole in the ground. I walked up to a wire fence around the yard and saw she was sprinkling lime on a dead body.

"Suddenly she seemed to feel that someone was watching her, and turning she gasped, 'My God! I thought you were a ghost'."

"I did nothing but stepped through the gate. Heldgren's head lay staring up at me from the grave. The body was in a gunny sack and the arms and legs had been tossed in upon it. I helped Mrs. Gunness to fill up the hole. From that night I had her in my power."

Such was Lamphere's grim story of his romance with this arch-murderess, and there is no doubt that he batted on his knowledge of her crimes and the fear of exposure which he instilled into her. And Ray Lamphere kept a very wary eye upon Belle Gunness to make sure that he did not go the way of Andrew Heldgren and the other guests at La Porte who vanished from mortal ken. Fresh in his mind was the conversation he had overheard between his mistress and Heldgren in which she stated her intention of getting rid of him (Lamphere). So he was not taking any chances.

The only charge against Ray Lamphere at the outset was that of setting fire to the farmhouse, but in view of his confession, the police tried desperately to prove that not only had he taken part in the murders committed by his mistress, but that—probably from motives of revenge for something or other—he had deliberately slain his mistress, and, with ironic justice buried her body in her own garden graveyard among the bodies of her several victims. Then he had set fire to the place to destroy all traces of his crime.

Lamphere possessed such detailed knowledge of the farmhouse and its secrets that these suspicions were justified to some extent. For example he gave a minute description of the secret chamber of horrors where Belle's wretched victims were first chloroformed and then murdered with an axe. It was the bedroom into which they were ushered on their arrival, and in which they entered upon their last long sleep. Nobody was ever allowed to enter that Grand Guignol bedroom except her intended victims. It was always kept locked.

Anna Brogiski, who was employed as a maid at the farmhouse also mentioned this room, and related how she was never allowed to enter the "bedroom off the parlour". She told the police that the

Gunness children were afraid of their mother and would never go near the room.

"I was warned to keep out" declared Anna, "and I minded." Her obedience was fortunate as well as commendable.

One may wonder how the graves in which the score or so bodies were found, came to be dug since some of them were four feet in depth, and contained two and even more mutilated corpses. That Belle herself dug some is certain, for she was a hefty woman of strong build. But she did not dig all of them. Anna Brogiski's father described how he had dug several of the graves at the order of his mistress without realising the sinister nature of their purpose.

"She told me to dig some pits in which to bury rubbish," he stated, "and as each one became full, I dug others."

Anna said that she had been ordered to gather up all the old tins she could find and fling them in a half full pit in which there was a lot of earth.

Lamphere revealed that there was another secret room in the basement of the house, where a quantity of ice was always kept.

"It was a kind of mortuary," he told the police, "big enough to hold at least six bodies at a time. She did the dismembering here, the legs, arms and head being severed from the body with an axe or a saw. . ."

In spite of all the efforts of the police however, they were never able to prove that Ray Lamphere aided his mistress in the crimes, or that he was guilty of her murder. When at length he was brought to trial in November 1908 he was found guilty only on the arson charge and was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment.

Even if Belle Gunness had not perished at the hands of Lamphere—which seems fairly certain although it could not be proved—it is more than likely that justice would have caught up with her in the near future. Before Andrew Heldgren left for La Porte, he had shown his brother one of the loving letters from his bride-to-be. "I will be sure to write and let you know how we are getting on," Andrew told his brother John as he bade him goodbye.

But as the days and weeks went by, and no message came from

Andrew, nor any reply to letters sent to him, John thought that his brother must have been taken ill. So he wrote to Belle for news.

This was the reply he received from the apparently heart-broken widow :—

“It is with tears flooding my eyes and a heart overwhelmed with grief that I write you about your dear brother, my sweetheart. . . . He left my house seemingly happy and since that time I have not seen him. I will go to the end of the world to find him. I love him and will help you.”

Now observe the subtlety of the concluding paragraph.

“Sell off everything he owns ; get together as much of your own money as you can and come here. We will then go and seek him. . . . Do not neglect to bring the money in cash. I will be ready to go when you arrive.—Yours in great sorrow.

Mrs. Belle Gunness.”

At the very moment she was writing this letter, the man whom she was professing to love with such devotion, was lying buried beneath a few feet of earth less than ten yards away. He had been slain by the hand which wielded so facile a pen. In all probability Andrew's brother would have suffered a like fate, if he had accepted Belle's invitation to “come here”.

Fortunately the hospitable Belle had met her death and the farm had been burned to the ground before he could decide to follow his brother to La Porte.

When Shakespeare referred to “saint-seducing gold”, it was an apt description of its lure, not that Belle was a saint by any stretch of the imagination, but her sister did declare that before the marriage to Mr. Gunness the dead woman was very religious and known to every Norwegian Sunday-school child in Chicago because of her kindness.

“She was extremely fond of her children”, declared this sister, “and I have seen as many as ten or a dozen of them running about her home. She would play games with them and treat them with the utmost kindness. She loved to spend money on

them and was simply adored by every child in the neighbourhood." What then had changed this kindly woman who so loved children into one of the most revolting fiends in the history of crime? It seems that once she had tasted the sweets of wealth following the death of her first husband, she developed an "accursed hunger for gold."

Again let her sister speak! "She seemed to change after the death of her first husband," she stated. "She began to get morose—mean. She scraped and saved any penny that she could, and even stinted her own children of the clothes they really needed. Not that she spent the money on herself. She didn't! She simply hoarded it and seemed to want more and more. . . ."

Here, in the simple words spoken by a sister who knew all the foibles of Belle and had noted the change which came over her, is a partial explanation for the orgy of crime at La Porte. Her insane craving for money had corrupted her mind and soul, transforming her into a human counterpart of the praying mantis that monster of the insect world which consumes the lovers it lures into its deadly embrace.



ANTOINETTE SCIERI  
(see *The Poisoning Nurse*)

PLATE VI



EXHIBIT

## VAMPIRE OF KANSAS CITY

IT was a strange premonition of death which came to Dr. Zeo Zoe Wilkins some forty-eight hours before she was discovered with a knife in her throat. Amidst a scene of wildest disorder she lay dead in the sumptuous office in Kansas City, from which she ran her osteopathic business.

Just two days before an assassin's hand struck her down, Zeo told Mrs. Eva Grundy, a patient and friend, "I have but forty-eight hours to live."

Almost to the very hour her prophecy came true.

Prior to that she had confided to her attorney, Jesse James, "At least four persons have threatened to get me. . . I'm worried—terribly afraid." And well she might be, for murder, suicides and the wrecks of human lives and fortunes had been the milestones of her life; indeed she had been guilty of pretty well every crime in the calendar.

The tragic discovery was made by Mrs. G. L. Palmer when she made a personal call upon the osteopath. She noticed that newspapers lying in the porch of the premises had not been taken in for two or three days, and that uncollected letters were poking out from the over-filled letter-box. To repeated knocking she obtained no reply, so Mrs. Palmer got a little boy to clamber through a side window. He soon came out, a look of terror on his face as he cried, "She's dead—she's been killed—there's blood all over the place."

When the police forced the door and entered the room which had been used as a consulting room, they found Zeo Wilkins, lying on the floor in a welter of blood. A great hole had been burned in the thick pile of the Turkish rug on which lay the body,

clearly indicating that the murderer had tried to set fire to the place in order to destroy traces of his crime. There was evidence too that the dead woman had put up a terrific fight for life. Her gown was torn to shreds, and her injuries indicated that great violence must have been used. In addition to the wound in her throat her neck and forehead had been bruised and lacerated. The room was strewn with papers, and every drawer had been thoroughly ransacked.

Who had murdered Dr. Zeo Zoe Wilkins ? And why ?

Those were the two questions to which the police tried to find answers. Three people were suspect ! Charles Wilkins, a brother of the victim, B. F. Tarpley one of her patients, and Dillard Davis, the coloured janitor in the home of the dead woman. They were all subjected to the fiercest grilling and proved innocent, so to this day the murder of the osteopath remains shrouded in mystery.

Not so the lurid story of her life, for the glare of publicity which was concentrated on her death revealed the hideous spectres of her past in all their revolting details.

It was perhaps an unlucky omen that she should have been the thirteenth child of her parents who lived in the little township of Lamar, Montana, U.S.A. They were humble in circumstances, dealing in butter and eggs, yet they managed to scrape up enough to send fifteen-year old Zeo to the School of Osteopathy at Kirksville, in the same state. They did not know that their daughter had decided on osteopathy as a profession, simply because it would be the means of putting her in touch with men and women of wealth—particularly men. She wrote to a schoolgirl friend that she intended to use her beauty to this end.

Thus early she had decided on a vampire career, and how utterly and unscrupulously she carried out her plans will be seen. She did in fact become one of the best known feminine practitioners of the science, and, because she was a woman, and a very beautiful woman at that, she gathered around her a clientele of wealthy patients among whom the male sex predominated.

Of Junoesque figure, with a wealth of crisp curly hair and a pair of dark flashing eyes, she had a striking appearance, and from

the very outset of her career Zeo Wilkins cashed in on her physical charms.

In a way she was a female Jekyll and Hyde, for in a diary which she wrote even before she began her studies, she described her two personalities. "Helen was the better self," she confessed in this document, "Zeo the evil. My family always liked Helen the better but Zeo developed so readily that I soon grew too fond of her and Helen found less and less favour in my mind." an illuminating admission you may think in view of subsequent developments.

At the school of Osteopathy, Zeo applied herself to her studies with zest for she had determined to make a success of her career. One of her fellow students chanced to be Richard Dryer, the son of a prominent banker in Montana. "I intend to marry him," wrote Zeo to her girl friend at Lamar. "I shall get enough money to finance my start in osteopathy and then divorce him." which was further early evidence of her cold and calculating mind.

She carried out her intention, and the young man had scarcely got to know his bride upon whom he had settled a large sum of money, when she blandly told him that she was going to divorce him and return to school to continue her studies. She was as good as her word. Some weeks later she received a heart-broken letter from the boy's father to say that his son had taken his life because of her desertion.

Displaying not the least remorse or sorrow at the tragedy she had brought about, she promptly set her cap at a young doctor, C. K. Garring, who was adding osteopathy to his other medical qualifications. As well as being captivated by Zeo's beauty, he was also impressed by the brilliance of her work, and the combination made him a ready victim to her wiles. On the very night following their graduation in 1905, they eloped and after a brief but passionate honeymoon, young Garring proudly took his wife back to San Antonio, Texas, where he lived with his extremely wealthy parents. They settled down in one of the most fashionable quarters of the town in a fine house purchased for them as a wedding present by the bridegroom's dotting parents. Every luxury that her heart could desire was lavished upon Zeo, who became one of the

most popular women in San Antonio social circles. Had she so desired, she could have lived a life of ease and pleasure. But the Zeo (or Hyde) in her, gradually rose to the surface. She could not resist the adulation of men, and there was one in particular who capture her imagination. They became lovers, and during one of his surreptitious visits to her, tragedy for the second time entered Zeo's life.

She was in the arms of her lover when she heard her husband's car drive up to the front of the house. Without a moment's hesitation Zeo seized a revolver, and crept downstairs into the hall to await the entrance of her husband. The moment he opened the door, she fired a fusilade of shots at him. He staggered out of the door and fell bleeding on to the lawn. In the meantime the lover made his escape.

When the police arrived, Zeo was still standing over Garring, the smoking revolver grasped in her hand. Her husband alive, unconscious, was rushed off to hospital.

"I heard noises downstairs and saw a shadowy figure moving about," Zeo told the police in answer to their questions. "I thought it was a burglar and I fired."

Her plausible explanation was accepted by the police, but evidently the husband had other views. When he had recovered and was discharged from hospital, he brought an action for divorce and succeeded. In court he declared that his marriage had been "a foolish mistake", and that his young wife was "too temperamental and hot headed". An understatement one may think.

For a time Zeo faded from public sight and knowledge, until one day the newspapers came out with a sensational story of the arrest of a prominent Oklahoma banker on a charge of embezzlement. It was revealed that this elderly Romeo, had fallen beneath the spell of Zeo Wilkins (she had reverted to her maiden name) and had loaded her with jewels, furs and other extravagant gifts including vast sums of money. It was only when his bank failed and he was brought to the verge of ruin, that his folly and his crime came to light. A typical entry in Zeo's diary read :- Without a scratch of the pen I got 17,000 dollars."

The banker was sent to gaol, and Zeo turned her attentions to Leonard Smith, a druggist in Kansas City who completely lost his head when this Jezebel focussed the battery of her charms upon him. For the time being she was eschewing matrimony, having found that she was able to wheedle money from her victims without becoming a bride—at any rate dispensing with the marriage ceremony.

In all, she obtained over 15,000 dollars from her lover Smith which fact was duly recorded in her diary with the brief note, "He gave me all his money and went to get more. . . poor man."

The sympathetic comment arose from the fact that her lover was accidentally shot dead during a street fracas while going to his bank for further money to squander on his beloved. In this case Zeo must be absolved from direct responsibility for her lover's tragic fate.

One would think that with all these thousands of dollars simply falling into her lap Zeo Wilkins might have concentrated on her osteopathic career, and left romance behind for a time. But she was a girl of great ambition, and was determined that once she *did* start it would be on such spectacular lines and on such a sumptuous scale that only the wealthiest patrons would seek her services.

It was through her picture appearing in the newspapers as a result of her connection with the banker in Oklahoma that Zeo entered the matrimonial stakes for the third time. In Oklahoma City lived a prosperous furniture dealer, Grover Burcham. He saw the photograph which was published, and—like countless others who are drawn to anybody achieving notoriety—he wrote to her. Zeo made discreet enquiries ere committing herself, and having discovered that the writer was a man of repute and substance, she replied to his letter and cupid took charge.

They were married and again a long and happy union might have ensued but for the wanton extravagance of Zeo. There appears to have been a certain amount of mutual affection but her spendthrift ways would have ruined any man no matter how wealthy. Only a few years after their marriage Zeo awakened one morning to find her husband gone. He had risen, packed a few

things and disappeared without a word or note by way of explanation. This was a reversal of the usual procedure with a vengeance since it was Zeo, who, as a rule, performed the deserting act. She could not understand it, but was forced to the conclusion that her wild extravagance must have been partly the cause when she discovered that her husband had sold his business, realised all his available assets, and taken practically every dollar he could lay his hands on, leaving her stranded.

Of course, Zeo was not without money, for she took good care that wherever she happened to be somebody would be around to provide her with considerably more than the bare necessities of life. A couple of weeks went by, and the deserted wife was just making up her mind about her next move and her next victim, when there came a brief note from the missing Burcham. "Join me at Houston, Texas", it said. "Say nothing to anyone as to my whereabouts."

Her immediate problem thus solved. Zeo blithely set out to rejoin her husband. He was living in a nicely furnished house on the outskirts of town, and clasped her fondly in his arms when she arrived.

"You nearly broke me", he told his wife. "I just had to get away before I got into trouble. But I missed you darling—and I simply had to send for you." For a few months Zeo tried to restrain her extravagance, but eventually she broke out again, and it was not long before her infatuated husband found himself up against the old problem of finding enough money to satisfy the inordinate demands of his wife.

The climax came one night when the Houston police shot and killed a robber whom they caught red-handed in the process of burgling a mansion in the town. The intruder had put up a stiff fight until a bullet found its mark. It was Burcham! He had resorted to crime in order to keep his wife in luxury. Zeo was arrested in the belief that she had been at least the instigator, if not an actual partner in her husband's crimes. For *crimes* it was, as a search of the home in which they lived made clear. The fine clothes and furs which had bedecked the statuesque figure

of Zeo, as well as the costly furnishings which had decorated their love nest, were either the proceeds of burglaries far and near, or else had been bought with stolen money.

Although Zeo pretended to be greatly upset and protested her innocence about her husband's activities, there can be no doubt that it was she who had driven him to crime. At the same time it must be admitted that she did genuinely grieve the loss of this husband—probably the only man of whom she was ever really fond.

The police could do nothing to her, and to get away from the scene of her sorrow she journeyed to Colorado Springs, the playground of the idle rich. Among the visitors there, was seventy-two-year-old Thomas W. Cunningham, a retired millionaire banker who cast an appreciative if rheumy eye upon the physical charms of the alluring widow Zeo. It was the first time for twenty-five years that this aged Romeo had taken a holiday from his native Joplin in Montana where he owned a big estate.

Zeo was quick to notice the ardent glances the old man cast upon her figure as she disported herself in the sunshine, clad in the latest fashion beach wear. She made discreet enquires and from the moment she learned his identity, old man Cunningham became her target. She displayed tender solicitude towards him, and acted the old man's darling to such effect that before a month had passed, the banker was begging her to become his wife. Zeo though not eager for matrimony, had nothing against wifedom provided its dividends were substantial. She first made sure that there was to be no slip betwixt cup and lip so to speak, and even before their marriage she succeeded in obtaining from her lover, dollars to the equivalent of £80,000.

This nice cash-down advance payment was sufficient to convince the insatiable Zeo that this elderly bridegroom was a most attractive investment. Coyly she professed that her love for him was growing, and he could name the happy day. So December and May were married at Colorado Springs, and as a further token of his love, the husband—President of Joplin's most prosperous bank, bear in mind—promptly gave Zeo 300,000 dollars

worth of bank stock which she as promptly sold for the equivalent of £60,000. He also settled upon her certain landed property of which he was possessed. Their honeymoon over, the bride thought she would like to visit Chicago before settling down in Joplin.

Motor-cars, town and country homes, jewellery of immense value, these were the offerings which Cunningham laid upon the altar of love and in return his goddess did not stint him the kisses he craved. But alas ! his dreams of love were soon destined to turn into nightmares.

The first shattering blow to the romance came when a Mrs. Tabitha Taylor, seventy-year-old housekeeper of Mr. Cunningham, declaring that she was his common law wife, brought an action against Zeo for alienation of the old man's affections. She had tended him for twenty-five years, she averred. Then, Joplin friends of the aged bridegroom brought an action for the annulment of the marriage on the grounds of the old man's insanity. They even went so far as to kidnap him, snatching him from the very arms of his young bride while the trial of the action was pending.

Once away from the wiles of Zeo, and back again in Joplin Mr. Cunningham had leisure to repent his hasty marriage, and he consented to divorce proceedings being instituted. Zeo also compromised and consented to yielding up all her husband's property with the exception of assets to the value of £60,000. All in all, her net total of £120,000 was generous compensation for a few months of married life to an old dotard.

And among the tangible assets included in the settlement was an exceptionally handsome young man, Albert Marksheffel, who had been employed by the Cunninghams as chauffeur. Handsome Albert had qualifications beyond those necessary to a driver-mechanic and often when Mr. Cunningham was enjoying his afternoon siesta, Zeo and Albert would enjoy the intimate delights of each others company. To put it plainly they became lovers and Albert was already earmarked as husband number five when the brief—but profitable—encounter with Banker Cunningham came to an end.

This time, however, Zeo had picked a partner who was less amenable to her whims than her previous husbands or lovers. Albert was unable to give her anything but love, so it fell to Zeo to provide the material things of life and this she did with unwanted profligacy.

She embarked on an orgy of spending, and opened a banking account for her husband with £5,000 to his credit. They occupied a fine house in Colorado, and she set him up in a motor business. In return, he fulfilled the role of a spouse without the rapturous adoration that she had known from all her other men. There were no extravagant presents from him, not even a few flowers on occasion, and Zeo loved flowers.

Once she lay in bed for three days pretending to be ill, in order to arouse some sympathy in her husband's heart. But all in vain ! From her "sick-bed" she demanded flowers and she wept when he refused even a posy. Then Zeo staged a macabre scene to shake him out of his indifference.

One night when Albert returned home from the garage he found a bow of black crepe tied round the knocker of the front door. His heart missed a beat ! Was Zeo really ill after all ? Had something terrible happened to her ? Yes ! he was shaken all right, and his feet could not carry him quickly enough up the stairs to his wife's bedroom. As he got to the door he noticed the sickly sweet odour of some disinfectant. All was silent within. He called her name but there was no answer. Almost fearing to turn the handle of the door he paused for some seconds before he pushed it open and took a frightened glance towards the bed. He nearly dropped in his tracks at what he saw. The blinds were drawn and in the dim light of four flickering candles, two at each end of the bed, lay Zeo her face white with the pallor of death, her lovely body shrouded with a sheet.

With slow faltering steps, and with horror gripping his very soul, the stricken husband made his way towards the bed to look down upon all that was mortal of his wife, or so he thought. As he approached the lids of her eyes flickered upwards, and she gazed at him with reproach. And then her body rose from its

recumbent position, her outstretched hand pointed towards him, and her croaking voice echoed his name.

Poor Albert ! He simply fell flat on his face in a dead faint while Zeo wiped the chalk-like powder from her face. It had taught him a lesson however, and he never ceased to bring her flowers—even without her asking—for the rest of their married life. But their married life didn't last long.

It was in 1907 that they were married, and in 1919 Zeo obtained a divorce from her husband. It must be a matter for conjecture as to which of the pair was the most relieved by the dissolution.

Following her divorce from Marksheffel, Zeo embarked with zeal on her osteopathic career. She opened her fabulous surgery in Kansas City, where with one or two love affairs mingled with business, she carried on a lucrative practice.

Her "manipulative surgery" was not the only activity in which she indulged however. After her death the police discovered documents which proved that many of her patients, whose trust she had gained, had been cleverly blackmailed by the resourceful Dr. Zeo Zoe Wilkins, the name by which she was professionally known. Some of her victims had been her lovers and as such—her slaves. She wormed from them guilty secrets which gave her the power to levy tribute upon them under pain of exposure.

By way of variant too, her osteopathic skill provided an ample if sinister cloak for carrying out abortions on wealthy women anxious to avoid motherhood, who thus also became prey to her blackmailing wiles. And if this was not enough, drug-peddling was another side line which Zeo added to her shameful accomplishments.

Perhaps hidden deep somewhere in these nefarious exploits there is the clue to the murder of this fickle, fascinating and vile woman. But it has never been found. The secret is locked in the dead black heart of the Vampire of Kansas City.

## VI

### SPHINX IN CREPE

“THE Siren of the Adriatic”. That is how they described the ravishingly beautiful Countess Marie Tarnowska, when she appeared at the Court of Assize, Venice, to face her trial on a charge of conspiracy to murder an unwanted lover.

There is an almost lyrical quality about the phrase ; a sort of rhythm as it falls trippingly from the tongue. But there was nothing lyrical or rhythmic about the career of the raven-haired Marie, who, at the age of twenty-nine had already journeyed far along the highways of crime and passion. Love and intrigue were among the fine arts of this woman who delighted in licentious romance passing from the arms of one lover to the other, and as ruthlessly crushing their hearts beneath her tiny feet when the fire of her passion turned to ashes.

As each lover began to pall upon her it was her custom to give him a moment of exquisite happiness and then—well—other love-sick dupes did the rest.

Thus it happened that when she stood in the dock at Venice, the Countess Tarnowska was accompanied by two of her lovers who had taken part in a conspiracy to murder. Other men had died for love of her before this, but the fascinating Marie had always taken care that it was other hands than hers that became stained with the blood of her victims.

The daughter of Count O'Rourk, she was the descendant of an Irish soldier of fortune of that name who had emigrated to Russia when Peter the Great was looking out for capable military leaders for his many wars. From this ancestor she inherited the fiery romantic temperament which evinced itself in her earliest days. Her mother was an ordinary Russian woman with the Slavonic

stolidity of her race. None of the restraining qualities which she possessed, ever descended to her daughter, and history relates that she had little influence on the upbringing of the girl Marie who grew up to be wayward, wanton, vicious and vain.

Small wonder that life on the small estate just outside St. Petersburg soon began to pall on the high-spirited Marie once she had entered her teens ; small wonder too that her father, with a typical Irish reluctance to assume responsibility for the care of his daughter, decided to send her to the very elite School for Noblemen's Daughters at Kieff. It required no little influence to enter this school, and the fees were exceptionally heavy. But Count O'Rourke managed to find the money somehow, and at the age of thirteen his daughter took up the educational curriculum provided by this exclusive establishment.

I have often wondered whether it would have made any difference to the life of Marie if she had been sent to some other school. From what I have read of her story I do not believe it would, for she appears to have been born to passion and tragedy.

In Russia, girls develop very early in life. They attain maturity much sooner than do the girls of Europe, and in the case of Marie, although only thirteen when she went to Kieff, she was the possessor of a beautiful figure, tall and rounded, fine classical features and lovely complexion, and eyes that were deep pools of promise. Her voice, even at that age was low and husky and her radiant charm was something which men found irresistible.

At the time she entered it, the "School for Noblemen's Daughters" was an absolute nest of corruption and vice. Kieff was one of the main training centres of the Tzarist army, the officers of which were largely recruited from younger scions of the Russian nobility. The dashing young cavalry students and officers quartered in Kieff naturally found the girl pupils at the school fair game for their philandering

By the time Marie had reached the age of fifteen, she had grown into a fine specimen of young womanhood, and—needless to say came in for a great deal of attention from the impressionable and ardent youngsters from the cavalry school. There was none among

the "Noblemen's Daughters" more inflamingly lovely than she, nor any more ready to embark upon the tempestuous sea of passion. Among the officers who sought her out was the Count Vassili Tarnowska, a regular man-about-town who prided himself on his conquests where women were concerned. Handsome and wealthy, he came of good old Russian stock, and in him Marie, not only discerned a lover after her own wild heart, but also one who could surround her with the luxury she craved and implant her in a social setting worthy of her beauty.

And as for the Count, he came completely under her spell like all the other lovers who followed in his train; for he was not alone in laying seige to the heart of this girl who was destined to leave behind such a trail of death and disaster. There was for instance a Russian prince, whose princely estates were heavily encumbered, and there was a baron who also lacked the wealth if not the passion of Tarnowska.

All three in turn eventually approached Count O'Rourk to ask his daughter's hand in marriage, and he in turn approached his daughter to discover her feelings in the matter.

"I would love to be a princess," Marie told her father, and the latter was overjoyed.

"I am glad that you feel that way my dear," he said, and then went on to explain why. "The prince is a good fellow," he said "and will prove a good husband. I am not so sure about the baron. As for Count Tarnowska—well—you probably know that he has a bad reputation when it comes to ladies. He is probably one of the most notorious libertines in the fast set at Kieff. I am afraid my dear that he would never remain faithful to you. . . ."

It may be that in Marie's eyes these words constituted a sort of challenge to her beauty and desirability, suggesting that with all her charms she could not hold her lover against other women. From that moment therefore all thoughts of other men were banished from her mind, and she set out to win the Count by indulging in a violent intrigue which became something of a scandal in the city.

"Take me away with you. Let us leave this place and seek

happiness with each other. . .” she pleaded with her lover. “It means giving up my career”, he warned her.

“What does that matter so long as you love me,” responded the girl flinging her arms around the man who was so utterly in her toils.

So—at the age of sixteen, Marie Nicolaievna O’Rourke, to give her her full name, succeeded in persuading Count Tarnowska literally to abduct her from the “School for Noblemen’s Daughters”, fling up his military career, and go off on an unofficial honeymoon ; for it was not till some months later that they were married.

They returned to Kieff where, in spite of their elopement they were received in the highest social circles. For a time Marie was happy in the whirl of the gay life which she and her husband enjoyed. But soon there came a rift in the lute of their happiness. The Count had ceased to be the passionate lover of their early romantic days, and was already seeking the company of other less beautiful women greatly to the chagrin of his wife. The prophecy of the bride’s father was already being fulfilled ; Tarnowska was running true to form.

He flaunted his mistresses before the eyes of his wife, and neglected her. Not that she minded, for she herself was not lacking in admirers and would-be lovers. So, while outwardly appearing to be in ignorance of each others love affairs, they went their separate ways.

But Marie could not entirely obliterate the feeling of pique that her husband should neglect her for other women, she on whom so many men showered blissful adoration without thought of another woman.

Two children were born to the Count and Marie, but even this did nothing to bring them closer together. Tarnowska continued to neglect his wife and seek the arms of other women. Yet he was insanely jealous of her. If perchance he saw her enter a restaurant in company with some young swain of the moment, he would realise how beautiful she was, and how other men must envy his possession of such a wife. Then perhaps for a week, the old passion

would return, and Marie would have to submit to his embraces again.

But these spasms of affection never lasted, and the wife sought solace in the admiration and flattery of other men. She still enjoyed the lavish style of life which her husband's wealth provided, and still entertained on the most sumptuous scale.

One day Pietro the younger brother of the Count came to stay at the Tarnowska home in Kieff. He was only a boy when his brother married Marie ; now he was a young man, tall, studious and with a tremendous reverence for all women. In Marie he saw a being who was nearer an angel on earth—as he thought—than anything he had ever dreamed up. He could not fail to observe how sorely she was neglected by his fickle brother. There was worship in his eyes whenever he glanced towards his lovely sister-in-law.

Marie was not slow to note the adoration of Pietro, and here she saw the opportunity for revenge upon her husband by making this youth her lover. To a woman of her experience in the art of love, the brother was an easy victim. A few tearful interludes during her lonely moments, her coy acceptance of Pietro's chivalrous, yet indignant sympathy, and he was completely captured. There was ample opportunity to indulge in lovemaking, and it was all Marie could do to prevent her youthful lover from going to his brother, confessing their liaison, and demanding that he release his wife so that he (Pietro) could marry her.

But this was not Marie's plan at all. She wanted to savour to the full, the vicious satisfaction of having cuckolded her husband in his own home—and with his own brother !

So Marie persuaded the brother to go away for a few months. "If by that time you feel the same towards me," she told the love-sick youth, "I will come to you."

It was, of course, a ruse ! Within six weeks she had written to Pietro to tell him that *her* feelings had changed, and that for the sake of the children she felt she must stay at her husband's side whatever happened.

Ten days after receiving this note Pietro hanged himself.

There was not a vestige of grief at his untimely end in the cold heart of Marie Tarnowska. "Foolish boy," was her only comment when she received the tragic news. She accompanied her husband to the funeral and stood dry-eyed and unperturbed at the graveside, as her tragic lover's body was lowered into the vault. On their return to Kieff the Countess became enamoured of a wealthy financier who showered priceless jewels upon her, and begged her to flee with him to the Urals where he had a huge estate. That was however a proposition with strings attached. Marie was ready enough to accept the gems he lavished upon her, but—she liked being one of the leaders of Kieff society, and was unwilling to leave behind—even for love—the gaiety and pleasure of city life.

Then along came another man who changed the course of her life. He was an officer of the Russian Imperial Guard named Alexis Bozewski, a handsome dashing sort of fellow much on the style of the film heroes of today. He fell head over heels in love with the Countess, who promptly ordered her financier swain to go back to the Urals and forget all about her.

Grief-stricken, he returned to his estate, but—not to forget his love. In despair he shot himself, leaving a last passionate love note chiding her for breaking his heart and praying that his younger rival, Bozewski, would be more fortunate in her favours.

It has always been a matter of wonder to me, looking back on this purple career why none of her discarded lovers—many of whom she ruined as well as betrayed—never shot this Russian Delilah instead of taking their own lives. They seem to have been content to live, love and lose, without any thought of vengeance upon the woman responsible for their unhappiness and ruin. The chivalry of unrequited lovers today, isn't what it was. From my own experience as a crime reporter, it would appear that nowadays faithless sweethearts suffer strangulation, stabbing, or shooting at the hands of their jealous lovers at the least provocation.

Marie Tarnowska had a genius for seduction and survival. Otherwise our story would not have reached the sensational climax which lies ahead.



ILSE KOCH  
(see *Red Witch of Buchenwald*)



KATHERINE SCHMIDT (left), PHILOMENE SCHMIDT and ALEXANDER SARRET (right, light hair)  
(see *First Acid Bath Murders*)

Bozewski proved an ardent lover, perhaps too ardent for Marie Tarnowska who preferred to pipe her own tune in the matter of love making. His demands upon her were as violent as they were incessant with the result that she tired of him, and decided to get rid of him. It was clear however, that she would never do so by merely giving him his marching orders, as in previous cases. She was convinced that nothing but his death would relieve her of his unwanted attentions.

And here we get yet another glimpse into the warped mind of this vain, selfish and over-sexed woman who would stick at nothing to gain her ends. Now she planned to inflame the jealousy of her husband to such an extent that he would slay the rejected lover.

Cunningly, callously she evolved the scheme; contriving a meeting with Bozewski at her home. "V—— will be away for the night, my beloved," she told him in the note summoning him to her presence. "We can love to our heart's content. . . ."

Alexis required no second bidding. He found Marie awaiting him in her boudoir clad in a filmy negligee of sapphire blue. Revealed in all their seductive loveliness were the graceful lines of the body which had captivated the souls of so many men. Marie knew that her husband was likely to return home at any moment, and had bade him come to her boudoir. Even while she clasped Bozewski in her arms, she strained her ears for the sound of her husband's footsteps, and when she heard them, she held her lover still tighter smothering him with kisses so that he should hear nothing.

But the instant the husband pushed open the door of the room, the amorous Marie became the outraged wife and instead of beholding her clasping her lover in her arms, he saw her striking Bozewski with wild fury the while she upbraided him for assaulting her. Without a moments hesitation the enraged Count drew a pistol and fired at the astounded man. He was wounded in the chest and his blood spurted all over the diaphanous negligee in which, a moment before, the Countess had so ardently embraced him.

Bozewski did not die at once. A Dr. Stahl was called in to

attend the wounded man. A pale gaunt figure was this doctor, an addict to drugs, and he too succumbed to the dark beauty of the Countess—who, to save her face with Bozewski kept up her pretence of affection for him. After Bozewski's death, Stahl lured Marie into taking drugs in the hope that she would become his mistress.

Meanwhile, the Count had been charged with the murder of his wife's lover. The Countess—perceiving this to be a good opportunity to get rid of her husband too without losing her position in society or—*his* fortune, exercised her wicked brain in evolving yet another scheme.

She sought out a lawyer named Donat Prilukoff, and tried to persuade him to use his influence to get her husband exiled to Siberia. Prilukoff was an unromantic figure whom Marie had known in earlier days. Extremely wealthy with a large practice, he was a happily married man with three children. Yet he found Marie's beauty irresistible and he was ready, nay, eager to become her lover, but was not yet prepared to forsake wife and children.

"I will belong to you if only you will do what I ask," she pleaded, and though the poor fool pulled every legal string he could to get the Count banished to Siberia, he did not succeed. Tarnowska was set free. The true story of his wife's affair with the dead man was revealed, and the disillusioned husband broke from her for all time.

It was now Marie's turn to despair ! She had lost husband and children. She was without money and had only her loveliness on which to rely in the battle of life. There was nothing for it but Prilukoff, she decided. He should be her lover ; leave his wife and children and come to her.

In vain the lawyer pleaded with her to let him remain with his family. But Marie was adamant. She had despised him in the past, and called him "The Scorpion" as a term of contempt. But the mere thought that any man could resist her for the sake of either wife or family, was sufficient to arouse her worst instincts.

"I love you," she wrote back, "you must come to me."

Prilukoff's marital scruples only inflamed the wrath of Marie

Tarnowska. Again she insisted that he should leave wife and children or she would never see him again. He struggled to shake himself free; visited her and sobbed out his love, protesting against her demands, but the woman remained deaf to all his pleas and at length he succumbed.

Together this ill-assorted pair travelled all over Europe visiting Vienna, Berlin and Paris, thence to Algeria returning to Marseilles. There the poor Prilukoff tried to break with his mistress, and, as he himself stated in court long afterwards, he even got aboard a train and started out on the journey which was to restore him to his wife and children.

"I had only gone a few stations when I heard the call of Marie," he told the spell-bound Court room. "I tried to resist it, but it was too strong for me, and I got out of the train at the next station and returned to my beloved." Such was the spell of this inescapable siren.

From Marseilles they journeyed to Russia where the Countess first met Count Paul Kamarowski, a Colonel in the Russian army. He too came of a rich and noble family and was a married man, which alone was sufficient incitement to the covetous Marie to make him forsake his wife. She succeeded and within a few weeks of their first meeting, the Count was openly paying court to this Russian vampire who accepted him as her lover, while continuing her affair with Prilukoff.

Kamarowski had to go to Warsaw, and Marie arranged to meet him there. Prilukoff, who had embezzled some hundred thousand francs for the trip—handed his mistress the money, saying, "This gift will bind you to me for ever, beloved." But how little he knew his beloved!

Off went the Countess with her new lover, and while in Warsaw she was introduced to a Dr. Nicholas Naumoff, a friend of Kamarowski. Naumoff was a good-looking man, striking rather than handsome. Kamarowski had just returned from the Russo-Japanese War when he first met Marie Tarnowska. The two men were in strong contrast to each other, the soldier being of rather commanding presence, the other having a more re-

strained appeal. Naumoff was unmarried, and said Komarowski, who introduced him to Marie, "He's a strange fellow. Doesn't care a bit for the society of women." It was a tactical mistake to mention this to his nymphomaniac amour, for there and then she determined to break down Naumoff's aversion to female charm. How completely she did so can be realised from subsequent events.

To prove his love for her Naumoff fired a pistol shot through his hand. He then allowed the Countess to tattoo him with a dagger, and as she engraved her initials upon his arm, she told him (Naumoff revealed later), that the sight of his blood gave her pleasure, for she knew then that he loved her as she loved him.

Meanwhile Marie was already tiring of her romance with Komarowski, and had sent for Prilukoff. He hastened to her side, and took an oath at her bidding that he would kill his rival Kamarowski for whom, Marie said, she had now developed a "revulsion."

At the same time she began to kindle jealousy against Kamarowski in the heart of Naumoff too, at one moment inflaming him with ardent caresses, and then reducing him to despair by cold disdain. It came to the ears of Naumoff that Kamarowski had been seen leaving the room of the Countess clad in night attire. He sent despairing notes to his fickle mistress.

"My adoration and joy," he wrote in one "I love thee. Think of me sometimes." Another which later was read in court ran:—

"I was and am and would have liked always to be thy slave. Thou hast deceived me. All is now finished and thou hast opened an abyss before me. My life has become impossible. . . ."

At once Marie hastened to his side, and with her arms about him assured him of her undying love. "I hate Komarowski" she declared, and begged Naumoff to kill him. She brought with her a telegram supposed to have been dispatched by the Count from Venice in which she alleged, he had insulted both Naumoff and herself. The telegram read:—"Your Naumoff is a worthless creature, a voyon (blackguard) and you are a worthless creature."

Actually the faked telegram had been sent by another of Marie's poor dupes.

That night Naumoff accompanied his mistress to a theatre, afterwards going back to her hotel and spending the night in her arms! It was during the hours of darkness that the woman plotted the death of Komarowski. "I will seek him out and challenge him to a duel," declared Naumoff, but the Countess would not hear of it.

"No—he must be murdered" she insisted. "In a duel anything might happen, and what should I do, my beloved, if you were killed? You must shoot Komarowski," she urged her lover, and then throw the revolver away where it will never be found. You must never mention my name, and must telegraph me in a false name." She even made him write her a letter in which he took full responsibility of the crime.\*

So finally Naumoff set off on his murderous quest, and the moment he left her side the Countess took train for Vienna where Prilukoff was awaiting her.

While in the lawyer's arms that night the Countess whispered her desire that Komarowski should die. They discussed the best way of killing him, and Prilukoff suggested he should obtain a chloroformed cigarette, and then smother his hated rival.

"No — " advised the Countess, "Let it be a dagger."

And all this time Komarowski remained in ignorance of the double plot which was being hatched to encompass his death. He still believed that he was the one love of the Countess, and in token of his love, and — at her instigation, he insured his life for £20,000.

This indeed was a further inducement held out to Prilukoff, "When the Count is out of the way," Marie said, "We will spend the rest of our days together. We can live on the money from his insurance."

Somehow or other the lawyer got to know that Naumoff was also out to slay Komarowski. He taxed the Countess with unfaithfulness but was rapidly reassured when she told him that because of her love for him she could not bear that he should take the risk and so had lured Naumoff into doing the actual killing. She added that she wanted Prilukoff to arrange for detectives to

be at the scene of the shooting, so that they could then arrest Naumoff. Thus she would rid her of both her unwelcome lovers, and free to bestow all her favours upon Prilukoff.

This is perhaps the ultimate in the art of the double-cross!

Let Naumoff himself tell the story of the actual murder as he related it to the packed Assize Court in Venice. "I went to the hotel where Komarowski was staying, and knocked on the door of his room," he said amid sobs which at times almost choked him. "I saw the Count and without speaking a word I fired at him. Then I turned the weapon upon myself, but it missed fire and I threw it away as the Countess had ordered me to do."

Prilukoff was lurking outside the hotel with his detectives, and when they heard the shots and the cries of the dying man the detectives rushed in and arrested the murderer.

But too many telegrams had passed between the guilty conspirators, and in spite of all the precautions of the Countess, her complicity in the affair became known, and together with Prilukoff and her maid Perrier (who knew all about her Mistress' amours), she appeared in the dock beside the man whom she had incited to murder, and then betrayed.

Clad in funereal crepe (which caused her to be described as "The Sphinx in Crepe") her face so pale that it looked like marble, she betrayed little or no emotion as the astonishing story of her amorous escapades and incitements to murder were unfolded.

Even when Naumoff described their last night together and how his mistress had taken from around her own graceful throat a golden crucifix inscribed with the words "God save you" in Russian, and placed it round his neck as she bade him kill Komarowski, did she show the least sign of sorrow or regret.

Small wonder that as she passed to and from prison to the Assize Court in a gondola, she was hissed and howled at by the public.

In the witness-box when replying to the questions of the President of the Court, she maintained the same glacial calm.

She admitted extinguishing cigarettes on Naumoff's hands, tattooing her initials on his arm with a dagger and then disinfecting

the punctures with eau-de-Cologne. She admitted sending certain telegrams to both Naumoff and Prilukoff inflaming their jealousy of each other and of Komarowski, but declared that the plot to murder the latter was not of her scheming.

There were, however, letters and telegrams so damning in their contents that it was clear that hers was the master mind which had conceived the crime and compelled her lovers to carry it out.

Of her amours she spoke dispassionately.

Asked the President:—"You know that the prosecution maintains that you had three lovers at the same time. Why was this?"

"Because I was seeking somebody who would really love me," was the quiet answer, "But I was always deluded."

"When you were sending telegrams to Prilukoff, you were on intimate terms with Naumoff, and staying at hotels with Komarowski?"

"I could not find anybody who corresponded with my ideal. When I sent the telegram to Naumoff — 'Telegraph me, caresses and kisses without end,' it was because I feared to break off relations with him all at once, lest he commit suicide.

"So you were sending caresses and kisses to Naumoff while you were engaged to be married to Komarowski?"

"Yes" admitted the black-draped woman, absolutely unmoved, adding, "but the engagement was not official," a reply which caused gusts of laughter to sweep through the court.

After a long deliberation the jury delivered their verdict on the 27 counts of the indictment, and Countess Tarnowska was sentenced to 8 years imprisonment, Prilukoff to 10 years, and Naumoff to three years.

At long last justice had caught up with this wanton of love. Or had it. *Did* the punishment really fit the crime do you think? Eight years imprisonment seems little enough for inciting a man to murder his one-time friend even if Marie served the whole of her sentence to the last day. But she didn't!

It was in March, 1910, that the Countess Tarnowska was sentenced. In August, 1912, she was released from prison on grounds

of illhealth, thereafter she became a wanderer all over Europe until stricken with a fatal illness. She died sometime in the early 1920's.

## VII

### THE POISONING NURSE

THE village of St. Gilles in southern France, lies between the towns of Arles and Nimes. No place could bear a less sinister aspect than this picturesque spot situated in the very heart of that ancient Roman province known as Provence. Arles, its old capital, contains many relics of that once great empire, and is famed as one of the cradles of medieval literature.

Nimes is equally famous in antiquity having been founded by the Romans who built its great amphitheatre and the Maison Carree Temple, together with the famous aqueduct the Port du Gard. Lying at the foot of the Garrigue Hills, Nimes overlooks the plain of the Vistre, rich with lovely vineyards. Nestling between these two age-old towns is the village of St. Gilles with its peace loving people, who, cherishing no evil thought or ill-will against any living soul, are — or *were* — incapable of imagining a ruthless poisoner at large in their midst. Yet — within a comparatively short space of time, tragedy, grim and startling raised its ugly head in St. Gilles, and sent at least six of its inoffensive souls to their deaths.

The significant point is, that, with one exception, all those who died were the patients of one Antoinette Scieri, a nurse who had settled down in the village, there to carry on her merciful profession. It may appear strange in the light of after events that no suspicion was aroused against her as, one after another of those she tended, failed to recover and went to their graves. With the exception of her lover, all her victims were sick people who had been entrusted to her care. There was nothing of the Florence Nightingale tradition about Antoinette Scieri however. She specialised in the taking of life rather than saving it, and her case

is one of the most baffling studies of criminal psychology in the annals of crime.

She neither loved nor hated any of those she destroyed. She rarely gained financially from their deaths, nor did she benefit from her crimes in any other way. In her professional capacity, it is recorded that she was kind to her victims, and professed the greatest concern that they should get well, and yet — she slew them without cumpunction and without remorse.

There is considerable obscurity regarding her origin, and beyond the fact that she was born in Italy and came to France as a girl, little is known about her early life. Until the year 1915, there is no mention of her in the archives of the French police. She lived for a time in Montauban, and the first peep we get into her career is when, having attained a brief experience of nursing she managed to obtain a position at the casualty clearing station at Doullens during the early part of the 1914-1918 war.

In 1915 she fell into the hands of the police in connection with a series of callous thefts and frauds perpetrated upon wounded British officers. Her *modus operandi* was as simple as it was lucrative. As the wounded officers were brought in from the battlefield, her nimble fingers rummaged quickly through their pockets seeking whatever valuables they could find. Any francs or English money would be filched from her helpless victims together with any other articles which she could sell or barter. Nor did she stick at these ready-cash transactions. In one case she got hold of the pay-book of an officer, and endeavoured to obtain an advance of five thousand francs from the Army bankers. In some instances she found letters written by friends or relatives of the wounded man. To these persons Nurse Scieri would then write a carefully worded note as coming from her patient, explaining the nature of his injuries, and asking that money should be sent to him at the address she gave. By this pretext she succeeded in getting several substantial sums from anguished relatives.

On her release from the term of imprisonment which followed these cruel frauds, Scieri was lucky enough to fall in with a man named Salmon who was a soldier with the Italian army and fought

on the side of the Allies. Antoinette was no beauty. She looked a typical gipsy with her swarthy complexion and thick black hair which hung in ringlets round her face. Her face was heavy and pouched, and her eyes were almost mesmeric in the steadfastness of their gaze. But there must have been something about her for Salmon asked her to be his wife and they were married. He went to the front soon after the wedding, and only returned when his wife bore him a son. Two years later — a few months before the Armistice — Antoinette gave birth to a daughter, and there is little doubt that she revealed a tenderness to her children that was totally out of keeping with her general character. For — while Salmon was away fighting she did not hesitate to indulge in love affairs with several other men. On her husband's return after the Armistice, he discovered his wife's infidelity and left her never to return.

From this point Salmon fades out of the picture, his place being taken by Joseph Rossignol, Antoinette's lover of the moment. It was not altogether a love match. Both Rossignol and Antoinette were given to drink and quarrelled incessantly. Nor was all the fault on the side of the woman. More than once when her lover came home drunk, he flew into a rage and thrashed her unmercifully. On one occasion her screams attracted the attention of a gendarme and Rossignol was hailed before the magistrate and sent to prison for a month for assaulting his "wife."

But — as is so often the case, when the man was released from prison, the woman did not hesitate to take him back to her heart, for in spite of his violence she cared for him so far as she was capable of caring for anybody except herself. They resumed their chequered life together and some time in 1920 they arrived in the village of St. Gilles.

Rossignol obtained a job in the vineyards while Antoinette announced herself as "Nurse" Scieri, and expressed herself ready to attend patients in their homes.

The arrival of a baby girl in 1922 put a temporary stop to her outside nursing activities, and again it must be said that she showered much love and affection upon the new child.

Like her husband, the other two children had vanished from the picture and were not heard of any more. It is believed that they were adopted soon after the husband left France for his native land.

It was towards the end of 1924 that a succession of deaths occurred in the usually healthy district of St. Gilles. At the beginning of December, Mme Rossignol — or Nurse Scieri as she preferred to be called — was summoned to the bedside of a fifty-eight-year-old spinster named Mlle Drouard. The latter worked in a laundry and had been taken suddenly ill. Antoinette was kindness itself to her new patient. "We'll soon have you up and about again," she told her with a smile, "and you'll forget you have ever been ill."

Mlle Drouard *did* forget for on December 11th she collapsed and died. The doctor certified her death as due to a heart attack, a technical diagnosis with which one could not disagree.

Christmas is noted for being a season of goodwill on earth in all Christian countries. But there was no goodwill in the heart of Antoinette Scieri as she tended M. and Mme. Lachapelle whom she had been nursing for nearly a fortnight. On Christmas night the wife passed away in excruciating agony. The nurse was standing at the bedside watching the writhing body of her patient who sank into a coma and died. The doctor was called, and Antoinette gave a detailed recital of the food the dead woman had eaten. "She had a small pork sandwich yesterday," she explained. "She particularly asked for it, and as she had been getting on so well I thought it would do her no harm."

Ptomaine poisoning was the doctor's verdict, repeated once more when M. Lachapelle died within forty-eight hours of his wife, suffering from similar pains.

A few weeks elapsed during which conditions in the Rossignol ménage were far from happy. Antoinette was drinking heavily again. Her lover got annoyed and beat her. Among the friends whom the nurse had made during her sojourn in St. Gilles was a Mrs. Rosalie Gire, mother of a seventeen-year-old daughter and wife of an agricultural labourer. She was a neighbour of the

Lachapelles and Antoinette became acquainted with them when she was nursing her luckless patients. To Rosalie Gire Martha confided the cruelty of her "husband" and now he had beaten her. It was a bad day for Mme Gire when she became friendly with the nurse through simply asking how her neighbours were getting on.

One day Rossignol came home to tea. Antoinette had provided a meal of mussels. Two days later he was dead! The symptoms of his short, sharp illness were identical with those from which the three previous victims of his wife had died; abdominal pains followed by collapse.

Antoinette was prostrate with grief. Her dark eyes grew heavy with weeping as she moaned "Oh — my beloved Joseph. Why have you left me?" Rosalie Gire spent long hours with her trying to offer words of comfort. Antoinette hugged her baby to her breast. "I have you my darling," she sobbed, "and while you live I shall always know that you are a living part of the man I loved."

A few weeks elapsed. Nurse Scieri was called in to nurse a Mlle Marie Martin, an elderly spinster of sixty-seven who lived with her sister Mme Doyer in the upstairs portion of the Rossignol house. They were rather poor and explained to the nurse that they could not afford to pay much in the way of fees.

"You must not worry about money," smiled Antoinette. "My mission is to heal and help the sick. Fees mean nothing to me." To do her justice, this latter statement was the truth, for none of her patients so far had been blessed with this world's goods to any large extent, and the nurse had never worried about payment for her work. Yet the circumstances leading up to the illness of Mlle Martin were, to say the least, peculiar.

On the day following the funeral of Joseph Rossignol, the sisters told Antoinette that they were going into Nîmes for the day. "You must take something with you," insisted the nurse, and produced a bottle of wine which she begged them to accept with her love. "I'm sure Joseph would have wished it," she said as tears filled her eyes. The two sisters were grateful for this kindness and went their way. On their arrival at Nîmes they

called on relatives with whom they shared the wine. Everyone who partook of it was taken ill, but as each person had taken very little there were no fatal results. Nor was the wine suspected of being the cause of their sickness.

A day or two later Antoinette came upstairs with two steaming cups of coffee for the two sisters. "I thought you might like it," she said in kindly voice, and again the sisters expressed their thanks. Mlle Martin drank the whole of her coffee but Mme Doyer drank very little. "It had a bitter taste," she explained later, "and I don't like anything bitter, so in order not to offend Mme Rossignol, I poured most of it down the sink."

That simple act undoubtedly saved her life. Both sisters were seized with sickness and compelled to take to their beds. Antoinette appeared most solicitous for their welfare, and Mme Doyer quickly recovered. Not so her sister. She became worse. It was at this point that Mme Doyer beseeched Nurse Scieri to tend her sister. For four days Antoinette was in daily attendance upon her friend, and nothing could have exceeded the care and attention she gave to her charge. But — at the end of that time her patient died, not long after eating some shell fish provided by her thoughtful nurse.

Antoinette's "mission to heal" had failed again. Mlle Martin's death was attributed to food poisoning from eating shell fish. What perplexed Mme Doyer however, was the fact that a purse belonging to her sister which had contained seventeen francs was missing. It was never found.

One might have thought that Scieri's reputation for *losing* her patients would have deterred others from seeking her services in the sick room. Nothing of the kind. Not many days had elapsed after the death of Mlle Martin when a M. Gouan-Criquet called her in to nurse his aged wife. Two days later, following the ministrations of Antoinette Scieri, the seventy-five-year-old Mme Gouan-Criquet died. A local doctor named Clauzel was sent for, and to him the husband confided that he too had suffered similar symptoms to those which had afflicted his wife. The

doctor was nonplussed! He refused to give a death certificate and informed the police.

Antoinette Scieri, the poisoning nurse of St. Gilles had run her murderous course. Under the bed of her latest victim was found a bottle containing a green fluid. Analysed it turned out to be pyralion and ether, a concoction composed largely of acetate of lead used for killing weeds in vineyards. There was enough of this deadly poison to kill three hundred people.

The police worked quietly! They were intrigued by the fact that all the dead patients of Scieri had suffered from similar symptoms. They called in medico-legal experts from the Montpellier Faculty of Medicine and reported the nature of these symptoms. The experts agreed that pyralion would produce such symptoms, and would be fatal to anybody to whom it was administered. But to prove that the other five people were murdered, it was essential that their bodies be exhumed.

In the still early hours of an April morning in 1925, French detectives accompanied by a number of gravediggers repaired to the cemetery at Nîmes. There in the cold grey light of dawn, the bodies of Mlle Douard, M and Mme Lachapelle, Joseph Rossignol, and Mlle Martin, were taken from their graves and thence to the coroner's mortuary at Nîmes. Post-mortem examinations and subsequent analysis, revealed in each case the presence of pyralion in large quantities.

The case against Antoinette Scieri was complete!

In the meantime while all these investigations had been going on, the poisoner was nursing another patient, a Mme Mirman, whose husband had found a mysterious bottle in his home which neither he or his wife could account for. On analysis the bottle was found to contain digitalin — an extract of fox-glove, a poisonous alkaloid which, while of use in certain forms of heart disease and dropsy, could in the hands of an unscrupulous person, prove a virulent and fatal poison.

Fortunately for the Mirman's they decided to part with the services of their nurse before she could administer any of this poison to the ailing wife — or possibly, M. Mirman himself.

In due course, Scieri appeared before M. Gouy, the examining magistrate. It must be explained that the examining magistrates of France are not like the magistrates who sit upon English police court benches to administer justice. They are more in the nature of prosecuting counsel out to bring home the guilt of any suspect who appears before them. There is no question of a prisoner being considered innocent until his or her guilt is proved, as in this country. It is up to the accused to establish innocence, which is somewhat of a reversal of the legal processes over here. One cannot imagine, for example, a learned magistrate in one of our police courts deliberately accusing a prisoner of a certain crime. His only duty is to make sure that the evidence of the witnesses called by the prosecution establishes the guilt of the person in the dock beyond all reasonable doubt.

With Antoinette Scieri the task was easy. Immediately after her arrest, she bluntly confessed to the murders of the five people whose bodies had been exhumed, but denied poisoning Mme Couan-Criquet. The whole peaceful countryside around St. Gilles was revolted when the story of her crimes became known. As she was taken back to gaol from the office of the examining magistrate, a mob of peasants tried to tear her away from her guardians with the expressed intention of lynching her.

"Hang her to the nearest tree," they cried, repeating the same cry when — a few days later — Mme Rosalie Gire was also arrested for complicity in the murders charged against her friend. Gire was brought to trial first and was acquitted. Later on however, she was called as a witness against her erstwhile friend and crony Antoinette Scieri.

But before we take our seats at the trial of the latter, let us take a hasty glance into the court of the examining magistrate in order to obtain some background of the process of justice in France. Having confessed to the murders, Antoinette was interrogated by M. Gouy. Daily and for hours on end, he plied the nurse with questions, mostly directed to getting her to admit the poisoning of Mme Gouan-Criquet. One might think that admitting to one murder more or less would not have mattered

much either way to the accused. But coldly and cynically Antoinette denied that she had slain the poor old lady.

"Listen" said the magistrate, "you poisoned Mme Gouan?" He left out the hyphenated second name.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders. "Pardon" she answered with a sardonic smile, "The old man was to have been put away, but I swear I did not poison his wife."

"But you murdered your lover?" — Yes! but only at the instigation of Gire. It was she who planned all the murders and we shared the spoils." It was because of this incriminating statement that the woman Gire was arrested.

When she was arrested and brought into the office of the examining magistrate, she screamed her protests at the charges of Scieri and demanded that she be confronted with her so that the nurse could accuse her to her face.

Perhaps you can imagine the scene that took place when Scieri was ushered into the room. Both women tried to fly at each other's throats and it was only with the greatest difficulty that the police officials present were able to keep them apart.

"It was she who advised me to buy pyralion to put in my patient's food," cried the nurse pointing an accusing finger at Rosalie Gire. "She told me to give it to them as medicine mixed with a little ether to take the taste away. . . ."

"You wretch — you lie" shrieked the other woman, striving to hurl herself upon Scieri who mouthed curses and threats in return.

"It was a great mixture for poisoning" commented the nurse, her dark eyes flashing with apparent relish at her deeds. "Only three or four drops, and no doctor would know how they died."

"What about Mme Mirman?" demanded the magistrate.

Scieri again shrugged her massive shoulders. "We were to have poisoned her," she said, "but her husband got rid of us too soon." This was a reference to the fact that M. Mirman became suspicious of Scieri after finding the bottle of digitalin in his home, and dismissed her. She was replaced later that day by Gire who apparently applied for the job. That same night Antoniette and Gire were seen dining together at a restaurant.

M. Gouy sent for the two women again, and once more there was a violent and dramatic scene when they came face to face in his office. They shouted at each other so loudly in Provencal dialect that he could make no headway in his interrogation and had to have them removed.

At a later stage while interrogating Scieri alone, he fired at her the question, "Why did you make your confession?"

"When I was arrested," she answered, "I feared that Gire would murder my three-year-old baby by Rossignol. That is why I told the truth about her. . ." And then, her eyes streaming with tears, she added, "Do what you like with me. Send me to my death but save my child."

This love for her baby was perhaps the one redeeming feature in the sadistic lust of this woman who in all other respects was a ghoul. That and perhaps a little affection for the lover she so cruelly murdered. During the period following her arrest, Antoinette wore deepest mourning out of respect for her dead lover, Rossignol.

"It was Gire who suggested that I should poison him," she told the magistrate. "I told her about his beating me, and she said, 'Don't worry! We'll soon quieten him.' The next day she brought some pyralion and ether, and I poured it into Joseph's coffee. . . Then when I fetched the doctor I wanted to suggest that he should be given a glass of milk which would counteract the poison, but I dare not — Gire was there and I was afraid. . ."

"What was your motive for murdering the others?" queried the magistrate.

"Robbery," was the sullen reply. "Gire was always wanting money, and once we shared 750 francs. . ."

Now 750 francs at that time was worth about £5, and as a result of their enquiries the police discovered that less than £10 in all had been stolen from all six of Scieri's victims. Which rather indicated that there must have been some other motive for her wholesale killing, if in fact there was any motive at all. It was even suggested that Scieri believed Gire to have been a rival in the affections of Rossignol, but there was never any proof

of this, and I think we may disregard jealousy as a possible motive for the poisoning of her lover.

The climax to this sordid story came when Antoinette Scieri faced her trial at Nîmes on April 27, 1926. Seldom has there been a more dramatic scene in any court of law than that enacted when Rosalie Gire — having herself been acquitted — was called to give evidence. The hatred of the two women manifested itself from the very moment of Gire's first appearance in the witness-box. It was something terrible to behold. They hurled fierce invectives at each other in their native *patois*, and they glared at each other with the malevolence of wild beasts.

When she came to the death of Rossignol, Rosalie Gire, was almost beside herself as she described the scene at the death bed of Scieri's lover. "It was she who acted the hypocrite," she declaimed. "She wept! She took his dead body in her arms and wanted to kiss him although it was she who killed him. She lifted him and danced round the room . . . The liar . . . the criminal. . ."

The Judge, intervening between the mutual accusations of the two women, enquired, "Where is the truth?"

It was then Scieri's turn.

"Gire first showed me the poison at the bottom of a bottle," she declared. "It was she who made me put it in the coffee . . . It was she who advised me not to send for a doctor until Rossignol was paralysed. . ."

"Look at the brute" shrieked the other woman in a frenzy of hate. . . "She wants to see me in her place. . ."

The Judge (*Juge d'Instruction* as he is called in France) turned a pair of steely eyes upon the self-confessed murderess. Then in a pitiless voice and just before passing sentence of death, he addressed her. "You have been called a monster," he said. "But that expression is not strong enough. You are debauched, you are possessed of all the vices. You are also a drunkard, vicious and a hypocrite and you have no shame. "I do not believe judicial history contains the records of many criminals of your type."

Scieri met these scathing comments with a scream of rage and

vile abuse. At length she paused. Then with a shrug of her shoulders and giving vent to a peal of demoniacal laughter, she turned on her heels and passed from sight.

The sentence of death was only a formality, for, despite the terrible nature of her crimes the sentence was commuted to one of life imprisonment. No woman had been executed in France for more than twenty years, and it was this alone that saved Antoinette Scieri from a well-deserved fate at the hands of the executioner.

## VIII

### SHE LOVED FUNERALS

IF I were asked to write the epitaph of Mrs. Martha Hasel Wise, I should use the phrase which forms the title of this chapter. It is simpler and maybe more apt than the lurid headlines which were emblazoned across the front pages of the newspapers in the United States, when her crimes became known.

"The Borgia of America" was how they called her, or alternatively "The Poison Widow of Hardscrabble," the latter being the name of the little village set amid the wilds of northern Ohio, where Martha Wise owned a forty acre farm on which she and her family worked. It was bleak ungenerous land not unlike parts of Arran Island off the coast of Scotland; barren brown rocks, with only here and there patches of unyielding earth that required hard toil and sweat to "scrabble" the barest of livings from it. An apt name for this village where Martha was born and lived and had her being, until her love for funerals landed her in a penitentiary for the rest of her natural life. It was here that Martha earned for herself her sinister reputation as a Borgia, a misnomer to my mind, for, although her attempts at poisoning were on a wholesale scale, revealing the same utter disregard of remorse or scruple, and the same refined cruelty as those of the Borgias, she was not animated by lust for power. There was in fact no adequate motive for her crimes.

Widow Wise was guilty of at least seventeen poisonings, three of her victims finding shallow graves in the reluctant earth of Hardscrabble with Martha a black-clad mourner at their funerals. The other fourteen — all her own kith and kin — recovered.

Now of all forms of murder, it is generally agreed in civilised communities that none is so heinous as poisoning. The knife,

wielded by the hand of a husband goaded into jealousy by the perfidy of his wife; the pistol-shot fired by a lover in a moment of frenzied passion; or even the murderous blow struck by the violent robber lusting for his victim's property, none of these is so cold-blooded or merciless as the poison administered with calculated premeditation — sometimes over a long period — the while the murderer watches the death throes of his or her victim.

In Britain there is short shrift for poisoners and rightly so. They are sentenced to death and perish upon the scaffold whatever their sex — unless proved to be insane.

There is usually such determination about the preparations poisoners make to encompass the death of their victims, and such diabolical cunning in diverting suspicion from themselves, that there is rarely any question of "disease of the mind" which would entitle a jury to find them incapable of "knowing the nature and quality of their act."

One may well wonder whether Martha Wise came within this latter definition of legal insanity, and it is interesting to note that when she came to trial, even the District Attorney must have had some doubt in his mind; for even though he pressed for a verdict of "Guilty of murder in the first degree," he also asked that a rider should be added containing a "recommendation to mercy." For the defence it was urged that the prisoner was an epileptic and had been insane from early girlhood. But alienists called for the prosecution declared that they could find no trace of epilepsy, and averred that she was quite sane and therefore responsible for her acts. You can decide for yourselves when you have read her story.

Picture the desperate struggle it must have been to wrest a living from the barren earth of Hardscrabble. That was the struggle to which Martha was born when she entered the world in 1882 one of four children, she being the only girl. Her mother was Mrs. Sophie Hasel who, with her husband worked a small farm, lived on the butter she made and the eggs she sold. In addition they tilled the soil and scratched what crops they could from its ungenerous bosom. From early morning sunrise until

the stars rose in the heavens the Hasel family worked without cease, Martha among them, as gaunt in appearance as the land on which she lived. Sallow of face, lack lustre of eye, and bony in build, no figure of romance was she, yet — she dreamed her dreams, and yearned for the day when she would flee the drudgery of her existence into the arms of some young man who would rescue her from the sterility which surrounded her.

But the years went on and no such knight errant appeared on the scene. She milked the cows and churned the butter; she dug and laboured, ploughed and reaped and wrung the necks of her father's fowls with never a breath of romance to lighten her heart. She was a girl of muscle rather than of curves; of usefulness rather than of beauty, and love passed her by. She was the butt of the family who jibed her, "a great gawk like thee'll never get a husband" they said. Neighbours were even less kindly towards her. "It's about time she found a feller," they commented scornfully. "How much longer do she think 'er poor pa is goin' ter keep 'er?" And Martha took to heart their remarks, and suffered a laceration of soul at their contempt.

Then — in the spring of 1906 she went to a box social event held at the local school. She had just passed her twenty-fourth birthday. She was "on the shelf"; at least that is what her family and the neighbours thought when she announced her intention of attending this gay function.

I must explain what a box party is, for in this age of miracles with television in our own homes bringing the world's news and events into our very parlours, and the cinemas, theatres and night clubs just round the corner as it were, it is hard to conceive the barren social life of the people of Hardscrabble. The box party was practically the only form of recreation and entertainment known to them. It was something more than this. It was an auction of romance, or so it might turn out to be. Every girl who went was expected to take a box of food which she herself had prepared. On arrival at the social these boxes were handed over to the master of ceremonies for the occasion. At the appropriate moment they were put up for auction to the

men present, all of them eager to escape the monotony of the food they got in everyday life. Eager also were they to take a chance in the lottery which followed their purchase, for the purchaser of any box had a right to the company of the girl who had prepared it, for the rest of the evening.

Imagine the excitement of that auction! The girls eyeing with appraising glance the man who bid and secured the box of food she had prepared; the men wondering which among the girls present had prepared the box he had bought, for the identity of the preparers was kept secret in advance.

Martha had no qualms as to the sort of food she would provide. She knew that the huge-built brawny sons of toil who would foregather at the social would not be intrigued with succulent dainties. Good solid grub in plenty that would fill their stomachs, yet provide a change from the potatoes, cabbage and hog meat upon which they mainly lived.

With her strong muscular fingers she wrung the neck of a fowl and roasted it. She carved chunks from the tender breast and put them between slices of her own home-made bread with thick daubs of mustard. Martha was no culinary wizard, but what you might call a "good plain cook," *very* plain in fact. She baked some cakes. She made some biscuits. And then — with her offering to Cupid packed in an old shoe box which she unearthed, she made her way to the school, hopefully — her heart a-flutter.

Eagerly she awaited the moment of the auction. Box after box was put up and fell to the rap of the auctioneer's hammer. At length Martha's box was held on high. If her heart missed a beat, who could blame the love-lorn girl from Hardscrabble?

It was no Adonis to whom her offering was knocked down, but a rough burly farmer some twenty years older than Martha. His hands were gnarled with the toil of working the stony earth of his farm. But then — so were Martha's. His face was deep-lined and weather-beaten as was Martha's. His looks didn't matter to the girl. He was a man, for the rest of the evening he would be her partner, and at the end of the festivities, he would "see her home." And — thought Martha — I will keep him talking in the

lane so that the neighbours can see for themselves, the capture I have made.

Albert Wise — for that was the farmer's name — duly saw her home and so began the brief courtship which was to end in marriage for Martha. It was no passionate love affair, for passion was rare in Hardscrabble. It was just a practical union of man and woman with the bride settling down to work on the forty acres of land which was farmed by her husband.

"We must work and pay off the mortgage" insisted Martha who had so bitterly savoured the struggle of her parents to make ends meet under the crushing burden of a mortgage. And work they did, all day and far into the night with only the birth of babies to interrupt the routine.

"We had a baby as soon as was decent," said Martha. Obviously a stickler for the conventions. "I called him Albert after his Dad, but he died. Guess it must have been my having to work so hard in the fields when he was on the way . . ." and there is a wealth of tragedy in this complacent acceptance of things.

There were four other children after that, three boys and a girl, Kenneth, Lester, Everett and Gertrude. Martha was a good wife and mother. Her children who were parked out when their "Mom" was sent to the penitentiary, have said so. They described how on a Sunday night she would go into the parlour and sit down at the little American organ and play and sing to them, simple homely ballads like "The Swanee River" and "The Sweet Bye and Bye."

Martha had accepted security in place of romance, she had done her duty by Albert Wise and brought four fine children into the world, children whom she loved dearly and cared for with every ounce of the mother love of which she was capable. Albert Wise was happy with her and his family, not rapturously happy but filled with a blessed content.

The farm was paid for, and Martha Hasel Wise was just turned forty when her husband left her a widow. Let me say at once that he died from natural causes. She missed the man with whom she had lived for sixteen years, but she did not grieve for

him, for there had been no real love between them. She wore black to his funeral and saw to it that the children "paid their respects" by donning mourning clothes.

Martha continued to wrest a living from the soil. And then, one day when she was hoeing some land near the white fence which marked the border of her farm, a strange voice bade her "Good-morning." She looked up into the smiling eyes of a fine looking man in his late thirties, similarly engaged in hoeing the ground of the adjoining farm. "I've just taken it over Ma'am," he explained, "so I guess we shall see a bit of each other from now on. My name's Walter Johns. You're Mrs. Wise, I believe."

Martha nodded her head. She was too overcome to speak. In a flash all her romantic dreams of the past — long forgotten since her marriage to stolid Albert Wise — came flooding back upon her. In her case it was love at first sight. Had she been only twenty years of age and not the mother of four children, she could not have been more entirely swept off her feet by the tide of passion than she was at this first meeting with Walter Johns.

That afternoon she baked a luscious apple pie for her hungry young family. In the evening she sent a goodly portion of it to "the man next door," little Gertrude being the bearer of the offering. Later that night when the children were in bed, Walter Johns called on the widow in person to thank her for the pie. Martha flutteringly produced some coffee and they sat drinking it together on the porch of her farmhouse. They talked and told each other of their lives. Johns had come from the city to settle down to farm life. He was a bachelor and knew little about farming. Martha Wise offered her advice and help. And that night she dreamed sweet romantic dreams of the kindly stranger who had come as though in answer to her longing. Had Walter Johns felt any romantic stirrings it is likely that I should have had no story to relate. But he didn't! At the same time he was not averse to accepting such favours as the smitten widow was willing to bestow, and ere long there can be little doubt they became lovers.

There was no thought in the mind of Walter Johns however,

of wedding the widow, who to tell the truth rather scared him by the violence of her unrestrained passion.

Very soon the word went round the neighbourhood that Widow Wise was "carrying on with Walter Johns." He was constantly in her home and did not leave till the early hours of morning just before the children awakened. Scandal became rife, and if that were not enough to bedevil Martha Wise, things began to go wrong with the farm. First of all the cows began to fail in their yield of milk. Then — maybe because her mind was too intent on love — crops failed, and the widow was hard put to it to find food for her offspring.

At first neighbours from all around rallied to her aid. They brought butter and milk and eggs. But gradually they began to murmur among themselves. "Why should we give of our scanty store to widow Wise to feed her fancy man Walter Johns?" they asked one of another. Nor were they the only ones to comment on the romance between the "city man," as they called him, and Martha. Her own mother Mrs. Hasel, well over seventy years of age, remonstrated with her daughter.

"Shucks," she said, "What do the likes of you want to dabble in love for at your age. Look at you — all wrinkled and lined like an old dried apple. Forget all about it and get down to work again."

But Martha Wise could only dream and hope, that one day she would break down the resistance of her lover so that he would make an honest woman of her. Then, thought she, I shall be able to flaunt him before the eyes of all the scandalmongers.

Martha's three brothers joined "Mom" in crudely telling her that she "was a growed up woman with kids," and "what did she want gallivanting around with a man who only wanted her for what he could get."

Not far away lived the Geinke family, aunt and uncle of the love-crazed woman, with their six sons and daughters, her cousins. They too tried to "save her from herself" by pointing out to Martha how "everybody was talking about her."

Walter Johns himself would gladly have pulled out of his

entanglement but for the fiery passion of Martha. Her eyes blazed with fury at the very suggestion that he should leave her.

"You are mine," she flung at him, "and nothing but death shall ever part us."

It is highly probable that her words contained a sinister truth, and that had Johns tried to leave her he would have become her first victim.

Meanwhile Martha resisted all attempts to persuade her to give up her lover. In spite of the scorn and taunts of mother, brothers, and the Geinke family, she continued down the road of infatuation, apparently impervious to the gibes directed towards her. Apparently, I say, because on December 13, 1924, Mrs. Sophie Hasel, her mother died in great agony from some abdominal complaint. No deeper mourning was ever worn by a sorrowing daughter at the funeral of a mother, than that worn by Martha Wise. She wept copiously, but evidently it was not her mother's death which impressed itself on her mind so much as the reception held after the funeral.

On the morning of New Year's Day 1925, Martha took a walk over to the Geinke's to wish them all its seasonal greetings. Mrs. Geinke was the sister of the dead woman, and recalled how "me and Sophie" had spent the previous New Year's Day together. She became tearful at the memory, as did Martha Wise who tried to console her aunt by recalling what a "wonderful funeral" they had given her mother.

"I shall never forget it," she remarked. "Do you remember how we had four kinds of cake and three kinds of pickles with the cold meat? It was grand!" And then in further reminiscent mood she went on:—"I simply love funerals. . . I haven't missed one in twenty years. I liked Ma's particularly with all the folks around feeling sorry for me."

Perhaps it was this love of funerals that caused Martha to decide that she would enjoy a few more. Whether or not this was the case the fact is that as she left her aunt and uncle and cousins on that frosty New Year's day, she emptied a good fistful of arsenical weed-killer into the water butt containing the drinking water

of the Geinke family, murmuring a cheery "Happy New Year" as she did so. A few hours later all the Geinke's were seized with violent pains and vomiting. Martha was sent for and came over to tend her sick relatives. With loving care she nursed them, and one by one they recovered. But only partially, for every now and again they would be seized with the same violent paroxysms of pain, sickness and diarrhoea.

Meanwhile a reign of terror suddenly swept over the area of Hardscrabble. Mysterious fires broke out; barns were razed to the ground; farmhouses were broken into in the dead of night and such valuables as lay about were taken by the mysterious maulauder, with never a clue as to *his* identity. For the people of the village were certain the perpetrator of these wanton crimes must be a man.

But worse was to come! At the beginning of February, 1925, Fred Geinke, Martha's uncle died in terrible agony. He had never recovered from the sickness which gripped the whole family on New Year's night. Martha attended his funeral and dutifully wept as she stood gazing down into his rough-hewn grave.

A few days later Lily Geinke, Martha's aunt died in similar painful circumstances. She was buried in the same re-opened grave, with her niece a fearful mourner at the ceremony.

Martha's cousins were frantic with grief at the loss of their parents, but Martha was there as she had been all through, to comfort them with honeyed words of solace. She took upon her strong shoulders all the funeral arrangements and saw to it that her aunt and uncle were suitably buried with chicken and ham sandwiches, cakes and ginger cookies.

So impressed was the parson, who carried out the funeral ceremonies, by the tender ministrations of Martha that he referred to them in his burial service, mentioning "the good works of this, our beloved sister."

Martha listened to the eulogy with head bowed in humility.

She stayed on to help out the stricken family, stricken other than by grief, for one by one they too were seized with the with the distressing symptoms from which their parents had

died. First, Marie, the eldest daughter, then in quick succession, Fred, Rudolph, Herman, Richard, and even little nine-year-old Walter, all succumbed to the mysterious illness and were rushed off to hospital.

They all recovered, but the rampage of arson and robbery which added to the terror of the peaceful inhabitants of Hard-scrabble continued. Up till this time there had been no suspicion regarding the deaths of Aunt and Uncle Geinke, but when the six Geinke children were taken ill, doubts were raised in the minds of neighbours and the police were called in.

Joseph Seymour, the Medina County Prosecutor took charge; medical experts were called in and the body of the aunt was exhumed. Enough arsenic was found in the organs to have killed a score of people.

How did it come there? That was the question. It was clear now that all the Geinke family had suffered arsenical poisoning. The symptoms, sickness and diarrhoea; the gripping abdominal pains; the tingling sensations in the extremities; the ultimate collapse; all these things proved the findings of the experts. In addition, the three brothers of Martha Wise, Fred, Henry and Paul were taken ill, and another cousin of Martha a Mrs. Rose Adams was also stricken down in the same way. Altogether no fewer than seventeen people were found to have suffered from the strange symptoms which now, were no longer a mystery. Even Martha herself complained of having been seized with the same sickness and pains, and was taken off to a hospital for observation.

Meanwhile the County Prosecutor was pursuing his enquiries. He found a coffee-pot containing the dregs of some coffee which Martha had fed to one of the Geinke family before he was taken violently ill. The analyst discovered traces of arsenic in it. He examined the coffee in its tin on the kitchen shelf. There was *no* trace of arsenic. The deduction was obvious. The poison had been placed in the coffee *after* it had been put in the pot. Who could have put it there? No great perspicuity was required to eliminate all but Martha who had prepared all the food and drinks for the Geinke family.

Days and weeks had passed by since the death of uncle Geinke on February 9, and it was not until March 18 that Joseph Seymour the prosecutor, journeyed to a hospital in Cleveland to interview Martha. As a result of the interview he took her back to his office in Medina. It was a shabby, barely furnished room, ill-lit and depressing. Only three were present during the interrogation of Martha Hasel Wise, the suspect herself, the County Prosecutor, and Mrs. Ethel Roshon, wife of the County Sheriff. Gaunt and spare, her sallow face expressionless, Martha sat answering the questions put to her by the prosecutor. Outside raged a Spring storm. On the tin roof of the office the rain beat down with pitiless force. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter it rang out in metallic rhythm. Into the eyes of the chief character in this strange scene there came a look of fear. She glanced up at the roof. She covered her ears with the hands coarsened by a lifetime of hard work.

The prosecutor leaned forward in his chair and snatched her hands from her ears. "You did it Martha," he cried. "You did it—you know you did . . . you know you did. . ."

The rain drops seemed to echo his words in their rhythm. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. You know you did — you know you did.

Martha Wise shrank back in her chair.

"I didn't," she sobbed. "I didn't do it."

Joseph Seymour reached out for a book. It was the register of a druggist in a nearby town. He opened it at a certain page and placed it before the now trembling woman. Her eyes fell upon the records of her purchase of weedkiller.

"I didn't do it," she moaned and lapsed into silence.

The sheriff's wife now took up the role of accuser. "Listen Martha," she exhorted. "Listen to the raindrops on the roof. They are the voice of God, Martha. Listen . . . listen to what they are saying . . . You did . . . you did . . . Martha."

With a cry of utter anguish like the wail of a lost soul Martha fell forward onto the table at which she sat, her head resting on her arms as she sobbed out her dreadful confession. "Yes . . . I did it," she moaned. "But it was the devil who told me to do it. He

came to me while I was in the kitchen baking bread. He came to me while I worked in the fields. He followed me everywhere . . . "I tried to escape him in my sleep . . . I walked over the meadows, but he came to me there . . . It was the devil I tell you . . . the devil. . ."

Gradually the whole terrible story was unfolded. The Geinke children recalled how they were taken suddenly ill after Martha had visited the family. They told the prosecutor how Martha had flown into a rage when her aunt and uncle had rebuked her for indulging in the liaison with Walter Johns.

Meanwhile Martha herself had made a clean breast of her various crimes. She admitted setting light to the barns and other buildings; confessed to breaking into houses and committing thefts. "I liked fires," she told the prosecutor. "They were red and bright, and I loved to see the flames shooting up into the sky."

As for the poisonings. Yes! she was also responsible for those as well. "I poisoned Mom because she laughed at me for falling in love at my age," she said, "And I poisoned the Geinke's because they made fun of me. . ."

In May 1925, Martha Wise was brought to trial, the newspapers luridly describing her as "The Borgia of America." Among the witnesses who gave evidence was her own son Lester who related how he had heard his mother say that she "would get grandma, and Aunt Lily and Uncle Fred." He also told the breathless court of the visits of "uncle" Walter Johns. The alienists called on her behalf — we should call them psychiatrists to day — tried hard to prove insanity, and Walter Johns gave evidence of how his sweetheart used to "bark like a dog." But all to no avail.

Martha Wise was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment in the penitentiary.

Almost like an anti-climax to the terror that stalked through Hardscrabble was the arrest of Walter Johns on a charge of being concerned in the murders for which his sweetheart had already been convicted and sentenced.

"At his trial Martha Wise was brought from her prison cell to give evidence against him. There was malevolence in her eyes

MARIE ALEXANDRINE  
BECKER

(see *The Poison Widow of Liege*)



ANNA MARIE HAHN  
(see *The "Mercy" Poisoner*)



‘CHICAGO MAY’ AND NETLEY LUCAS

as she gazed at the man she had loved unwisely but too well. "He said I should poison Ma and get everything my own way," she screamed from the witness stand. And then turning to Johns, she continued accusingly, "if you'd only come to me in court and helped me I wouldn't have told on you . . ."

But her charges were proved to be unfounded, and Walter Johns was very properly acquitted. It shows however, to what lengths his erstwhile sweetheart was prepared to go when anything rankled in her mind. Johns had failed to marry her. Her love affair with him had resulted in her being held up to the scorn and jeers of her family. So — Martha was prepared deliberately to send him to the electric chair by way of revenge. That she did not succeed was not her fault.

For years afterwards, she toiled in the laundry of the penitentiary, making clean the soiled garments of other prisoners. But no matter how hard she may have worked on this job, she could never cleanse her heart of the black murders she committed and for which she continued to pay the penalty until merciful death claimed her.

## IX

### THEY KISSED BEFORE THEY KILLED

IT may be something of a relief to take a brief respite from the stories of mass murders which have so far darkened these pages, for the story I am about to relate concerns the slaying of one man only. Yet, so diabolical in conception was this crime, and so primitively savage in its execution, that the woman who died in the electric chair because of it, amply justified inclusion in this gallery of female fiends.

In one or two respects there is, in the murder of Albert Snyder, something reminiscent of our own Thompson-Bywaters case, the echoes of which even now strike upon our ears from time to time. There was Ruth Snyder, the over-sexed dominating woman living in a world of romance and passionately in love with her equally passionate lover; there was Henry Judd Gray, a dapper little corset salesman engaged in a liaison with Mrs. Snyder, and there was Albert Snyder, the woman's easy-going inoffensive but unwanted husband, a living obstacle to the complete fulfilment of the couple's adulterous intrigue.

These then were the principal characters in the drama of life and death played out in the tiny courtroom at Long Island City, U.S.A., in the May of 1927, characters not unlike Edith Thompson, Frederick Bywaters her lover, and Percy Thompson the unwanted husband, who had figured in the drama played out at the Old Bailey some five years before, in 1922.

Not *entirely* similar however, for whereas at the Thompson trial Frederick Bywaters sought to save his mistress from the gallows by taking upon his young shoulders full responsibility for the murder of Percy Thompson, Judd Gray (as he became known), did his best to save his own miserable skin by pleading

that age old excuse, "It was the woman who tempted me." There was also another difference. So far as became known, Edith Thompson took no part in the actual slaying of her husband. Ruth Snyder on the other hand was an active partner with her lover in the murder of Albert Snyder.

Mr. and Mrs. Snyder with their ten-year-old daughter, Lorraine, lived in a very nice though not luxurious house, in Queen's Village, Long Island. Ruth Snyder was a very beautiful bobbed-haired blonde, thirty-two years of age, and fond of Life spelt with a capital L. She was never happier than when immersed in the night life of New York with its dance salons and cabarets. Her husband was of quieter disposition. He preferred his motor-boat and the open air, to gadding about among the high lights. He was the art editor of a magazine and while not exactly wealthy by American standards, he was sufficiently well off to enable his wife to entertain on a fairly lavish scale.

The Snyders were married in 1915, and from the time they moved to Queen's Village in 1923 Ruth Snyder was one of the most popular figures in the social life of its upper middle-class inhabitants. She was gay and full of life. She could make a party go, and being as vivacious as she was beautiful, she never lacked admiration from her male friends and acquaintances. That is what to some extent, makes her passion for Judd Gray difficult to understand. An insignificant, almost puny be-spectacled figure, there was nothing of the swashbuckling lover about him; little to sweep a woman off her feet. Mild-mannered, unimpressive in appearance, one can only wonder wherein lay his appeal, especially to this fine figure of a woman, attractive and fascinating, who could probably have chosen her lover from among a score of more presentable males than Judd Gray. Yet it was to him that she gave herself.

It was about three years before the murder of Albert Snyder that Ruth was introduced to Judd Gray at a restaurant. They spent the evening together, but did not see each other for some time afterwards. The woman had gleaned that Gray was a traveller for a certain firm of corset makers, and it is just one of those

things that when she was next in need of new corsets, she thought again of her friend "in the trade," and wrote to him care of his firm.

Upon such trivial happenings do life and death sometimes hang.

Judd Gray took along a number of corsets for his customer to make a selection. There was no thought of love, intrigue or murder in his heart on that first visit to the Snyder's home in Queen's Village. He was introduced to the husband who never dreamed that in this diminutive weedy figure of a man, was a rival who would not only take his wife but also his life.

Before very long Ruth and Judd were enmeshed in a love intrigue. How passionate in degree, may be gathered from this letter written by Mrs. Snyder to her lover only a few days before they jointly slew her husband.

"My own sweetheart lover boy," she wrote. "All I keep thinking of is U — you damn lovable little cuss. I could eatcha all up. Could I get lit and put out this blaze that is so much bother to me? Hurry home darling. I'll be waiting for you. Could I meet you at the train? I can't sit still enough to write what I am thinking about you.

Good-bye sweetie old darling, all my love.

Love and kisses,

• Your Momie."

On the Sunday morning of March 19, 1926, little Lorraine Snyder awakened in her bedroom, stretched herself and called out to her mother. There was no reply! She got out of bed and went towards the bedroom of her parents but was halted midway, for there, lying bound and gagged on the floor at the head of the staircase, she saw her mother. She screamed and then, with great presence of mind for a child, telephoned to neighbours who came at once. They released Mrs. Snyder from her bonds, removed the gag from her mouth and listened to the story she had to tell.

"I awoke to see a big man standing by my bed," said the wife. "He looked like an Italian. He had a big moustache and was very dark. . . He hit me on the head with something and I don't remember any more. They must have dragged me out here. . . ."

The neighbours entered the bedroom to find Albert Snyder lying in a welter of blood on the bed. His head had been battered to such an extent that he was almost unrecognisable. The police found that in addition to the savage head injuries, a piece of picture wire had been wound tightly round the dead man's throat while, stuffed in his mouth and nostrils, were pieces of cotton wool soaked in chloroform. Nothing had been overlooked to ensure that Albert Snyder should die.

The police searched the house for clues. There was no sign of forcible entry, but there was a suggestion of robbery in that pots and pans had been scattered about the kitchen, while bureau drawers had been turned out on the floor of the living room. There was no reason to doubt the story of the woman until detectives happened upon a torn-up letter, which, on being pieced together turned out to be couched in the most passionate terms of love. It was signed "Judd," the signature being surrounded by crosses, representing kisses. This was the first inkling that Ruth Snyder had any romantic attachment. The lovers had kept their meetings secret, and, but for the discovery of this incriminating document, it is possible that the hunt for the mysterious "Italian" assailant would have gone on. But now, a different light was thrown upon the tragedy.

Mrs. Snyder was rigorously questioned about the letter, and at length confessed her association with Judd Gray. He was brought in and interrogated with similar rigour. Under third degree methods of examination the lover's at length broke down, each making their separate confession.

Meanwhile the police had been piecing together the story of this murderous romance. They discovered that Ruth and Judd had registered at various hotels where they had stayed together, as Mr. and Mrs. Judd Gray. But it was from the two people themselves that the most dramatic and sensational story was elicited.

On the night of March 19 Mr. and Mrs. Snyder had gone to an all-night party at a neighbour's house. "Give my drinks to Albert," said the wife when drinks were handed round, and

before the end of that festive evening there is little doubt that, with the subtle connivance of his wife, the husband was not altogether sober.

They returned home, and retired to bed, and it is at this point that we can savour the drama which followed as unfolded at the subsequent trial when the illicit lovers sat within a few yards of each other in court.

Not even in the States have there been more riotous scenes enacted outside a criminal court than at the trial of "The Marble Woman" (as Ruth Snyder became known) and her corset-selling lover. Throughout her ordeal — with one exception — Mrs. Snyder displayed an almost uncanny composure, and it was this which earned for her the frigid sobriquet. Day after day raging mobs gathered outside the court, fighting, and tearing at each other in their frenzy to gain entrance. They came from towns and cities hundreds of miles distant in the hope of gloating over the titbits of sensuality and passion contained in the confessions of the woman who blamed her lover, and of the man who reiterated all the time, "It was the woman." Men and women fought with the ferocity of wild beasts. Coats were torn from the former and dresses were ripped from the backs of the shrieking women. Many of those who gained entrance were literally half-naked by the time they were able to feast their eyes upon Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray.

And what of the widow?

Garbed in deep mourning for the husband she had slain, she thoughtfully decided to make the most of her appearance. Her garments were in the very latest fashion of the day. Her knee-length dress revealed a pair of shapely calves and ankles, and her legs were sheathed in sheer silk stockings. She wore dainty shoes, and one of the newest sports model hats of purple velvet, close-fitting with a sloping two-inch brim. She was a striking contrast to her lover who, slumped forward in his chair, an expression of utter despondency on his face, had obviously taken no care about his dress.

It was only a small court where this scene was set, but some-

how or other over one hundred reporters were crowded in, many of them famous authors and writers who had been specially commissioned to describe the proceedings. There were also a number of sob-sisters—women reporters. And what a story was unfolded to speed their facile pens.

From the first words of Mr. Newcombe, the Public Prosecutor, sensation followed sensation. He drew a vivid word picture of the rapid development of the "Illicit love" as he termed it, of these two people. He described how, without the knowledge or consent of the husband, two insurance policies were taken out on his life with a double indemnity which provided that if he were killed by burglars, Mrs. Snyder, named as the beneficiary, would receive £20,000.

"And Judd Gray knew this," declaimed Mr. Newcombe. "The murder was the consummation of repeated plans. They were to have killed Snyder on March 7, and on March 4 Gray bought the window sash-weight and chloroform with which Albert Snyder was done to death."

He paused for a moment in his oratory and then referred to the following extract from the statement made by Mrs. Snyder after her arrest. It read:—

"It was understood between Mr. Gray and myself on that night (March 7) that he was to hit my husband on the head with this window weight and stun him after he had gotten to sleep and then administer chloroform to him, but Mr. Gray and I both got cold feet that night, and the two of us cried like babies, and I said to him 'Go on home; you're not going to do it.' "Mr. Gray went home. The next day I got a letter from Mr. Gray from Buffalo saying he was glad I sent him home."

Mr. Newcombe went on:—"Something had gone wrong, but the crime was in the making, and the wife and her lover, corresponding in code, fixed Saturday night, March 19, for the actual murder."

"On that night Mrs. Brown, mother of Mrs. Snyder was to be away and Gray knew it. . . . The lovers had arranged that Gray should secrete himself in Mrs. Brown's room until Ruth

Snyder came to tell him that all was clear, and that her husband was asleep in bed. The side door was to be left open for him so that he could enter while they were at the Fidgeon's party. . . . Picture the scene? In the room of Mrs. Brown lurks Gray with the sash-weight, the chloroform and the picture wire. . . . The Snyders return from the party. . . . Mr. Snyder goes to bed. His wife disrobes and gets in bed beside him. She waits till he is asleep and then creeps out to her lover. . . . Together they go to Snyder's room. They strike him with the weight and stick cotton waste soaked in chloroform up his nose and in his mouth and bind his throat with the picture wire. . . . The work done, they go out of the room. . . ."

For several moments the speaker paused. There was a hush throughout the court as he tore the collar from his neck and flung it to the floor. And then his voice rose as he gave point to his grim and awful recital with, "They kissed before they killed, and when at last their passion had claimed its victim they drank to the success of their crime. When Mr. Snyder was attacked by his wife and lover, it was this woman's eighth attempt to rid herself of her husband."

It is common knowledge that lawyers in the United States enjoy greater license in presenting their cases than do counsel in Britain. This applies both in procedure and in language. They can stalk the court and make gestures which would be frowned upon if indulged in by the members of the Bar in this country. So there was no objection when Mr. Newcombe referred to the "hotel frolics" of the lovers. It was just an apt phrase to describe the association of the pair.

Nothing appeared to disturb the glacial calm of the woman against whom the lawyer's tirade was directed. She listened with an air of impatience, at times bordering on disdain. From time to time she gazed round the court, smiling at those she knew, and giving a brief wave of the hand to her mother.

Not so Judd Gray, who sat, a pitiful object almost on the verge of collapse. They scarcely ever looked towards one another except when Ruth Snyder, undergoing a gruelling ordeal in the witness-

box gazed with hatred on the man who but a few weeks before had been her ardent lover.

There was not a tremor of a lip, or the least hesitance of utterance as she told the court the story of the fateful night. She declared that her husband had threatened to kill her unless she broke with Judd Gray. He had trailed them to various hotels and other secret trysts in the effort to put a stop to their union. But she was desperately in love with Judd, she told the court and when he suggested that they should get rid of her husband she agreed — but, it was only under pain of death, for her fellow prisoner threatened to kill her if she did not consent.

Mrs. Snyder went on to mention certain code letters which had passed between herself and her lover in which the murder scheme had been gradually fashioned. She explained that when she received a letter in which Gray wrote, "We are going to deliver the goods on Saturday," she knew that the murder plot was set for March 19.

Coming to the actual night of the crime, let Mrs. Snyder tell the story in her own words. With gloved hands resting serenely in her lap, and her voice ringing crystal clear, she stated that she had tried to persuade her lover not to murder her husband. She then went on:—

"When I walked over to him he kissed me, and I immediately noticed the rubber gloves that he had on his hands, and I said, 'Judd, what are you going to do?' and he became semi-mad to think that things had not gone as he had planned.

"He said, 'If you don't let me go through with it to-night, I'm going to get the pair of us.' And he then had my husband's revolver that he had gotten from under my husband's pillow, and he had it in my mother's room, and he said, 'It's either he or it's us.'"

Observe how the witness is trying to fasten the crime onto the man who, but a short time before she had been addressing as her "own sweetheart lover boy."

"We had arranged for Gray to come to the house during the evening and remain hidden in my mother's room," Mrs. Snyder

continued. "When we came home from the party my husband went to bed immediately. I also went to bed. I remained about ten minutes lying in bed beside my husband, then went into the room to Gray. We again talked over all the details and he kissed me. During the afternoon I had brought the window weight up from the cellar. Gray took it and went into my room. My husband was sleeping. Gray hit him with the weight, tied his hands behind his back and stuffed rags soaked with chloroform in his mouth. Later we disarranged the room to make it appear that the burglars committed the crime. We then came into the sitting-room, and while sitting there Gray thought of binding my husband's neck with wire in order to make sure of everything. . . He took a piece of wire from his pocket and went back to the bedroom."

Was there ever a more callous admission of murder than this? Mrs. Snyder went on to relate how for a full hour after the crime they were engaged in burning bloodstained clothing, and then sat making love while "we discussed our plans for the future." She described how her lover went into the bathroom to wash away the blood of her husband, and then, seeing blood on his shirt took that off. "I went into the room where my husband lay" the woman went on "and took one of his shirts for Mr. Gray." Note the coolness of her reference to "Mr. Gray." Together they went down into the cellar where Mrs. Snyder removed the nightgown she was wearing. This had also become splashed with her husband's blood. She burnt both garments. It was six o'clock on the morning of March 20 before Judd Gray left his mistress after stuffing a cheesecloth in her mouth and tying her hands and ankles.

So much for the woman's story. What did the man have to say? After describing how Ruth Snyder had told him of her own attempts to poison, asphyxiate and otherwise murder her husband, Gray declared:—

"I refused absolutely at first, and with some veiled threats that she would expose our relations to my wife and with some love-making, she reached the point where she got me in such a state that I did not know where I was at. . . ."

While in prison awaiting trial, he had signed a written statement in which he declared that he seemed to be in a "hypnotic trance," unable to withstand the commands of Ruth Snyder. "I was powerless to disobey her," he stated. Dealing with the night of the murder, Gray went on:—

"She went first, and I followed her into the bedroom. I hit the first blow with the window weight, and Mrs. Snyder's husband started to fight. "Mrs. Snyder became much excited, and I scarcely know what happened. Her husband seized me by the necktie and I think I am positive that she started to belabour him with the weight. "She had a bottle of chloroform, which she poured on the bed. I do not know whether she gagged him or not, but she tied his hands with a towel, and gave me a necktie to tie his feet. "I had lost the picture wire. I am pretty sure that if there was wire round his neck it must have been tied by her. I did not know where I was."

This was rather different to the account given in the first statement of Mrs. Snyder in which she claimed to have been absent during the actual murder. In that she said:—

"I went to the bathroom. I heard a thud and ran back and saw Gray kneeling on my husband's back striking him with the weight. I flung myself upon him and tried to drag him off and tried to undo the bonds which were fastened round my husband's feet and hands."

The public prosecutor referred scathingly to Gray's account in which he said he had wrapped paper round the sash-weight so that it "would not hurt so much." "It reminds me of the old woman who, out of the same feeling of kindness, warmed the water in which she drowned her kittens," he said, and then went on to point out how Gray had tried to prepare "a sure fire fool-proof alibi."

"This man, who was so dominated by the woman that he could not help himself," he said with bitter sarcasm, "this man who, scarcely knew what he was doing, wrote and left a letter for a friend to post in Syracuse so as to establish that he was in that city when the crime was committed. He also arranged for

this same friend to rumple the bedclothes in the room that he had taken in order to create an alibi."

It was a cunningly worded letter, innocuous in its contents yet revealing that Gray was possessed of the same cool determination as Snyder who left the side door open for him to enter, placed the sash-weight under the pillow in her mother's bedroom, and stole from the side of her sleeping husband to keep her murderous vigil with her waiting lover.

This is the letter Mr. Newcombe read in his closing address to the jury

"Syracuse, N. Y., Saturday 6 p.m.

"Hello Mamma! How the dickens are you this bright beautiful day, anyway? Gee, it makes you feel like living again after all that rain yesterday. If we only have a nice day tomorrow we will be all set. We have had so many miserable Sundays. 'Had' (meaning a friend, Haddon Gray) just came over for a few minutes. He wanted me to go home with him. Have quite some work to do yet on the line, writing, besides, then I am going up tomorrow for supper.

"I don't want to rub it in. If I get there in time, after supper may run over to a movie or vaudeville. This warm weather does not give one a lot of pep. I feel tired when the day is up. Tonight you go to R ——'s party? Hope you have a lovely time, and have one for me.

"But see that you behave yourself. I want to call up Eve tomorrow and see her before I leave, as I haven't seen her since Christmas.

"I haven't much news, so will get this off. Take good care of yourself.

"As ever, sincerely, JUDD."

Of course defending counsel had to make the best of a bad case, and both lawyers took it in turns to berate each other's clients. Mrs. Snyder's lawyer was particularly enthuſiatic as he depicted his client as the tragic victim of a "deceiving rake who entered her home, stole her love and murdered her husband. . . ."

Not to be outdone, Mr. Samuel Miller for Gray shrieked at the

jury begging them to believe that the corset-selling lover was a man "dominated by a will not his own, controlled by a brain not his own, and powerless to struggle against a super-power." He depicted the insignificant wilting Gray as wax in the hands of a "wily unscrupulous, lustful woman." He was soft and feeble, urged the lawyer, with his blonde mistress a veritable cave woman, subjugating him to her wanton desires.

The jury had no difficulty in coming to their own conclusions. They were convinced that all the way through that the pair had jointly conspired to murder the unhappy husband so that they could go off together and live on the £20,000 which they would have collected from the insurance company had their plot succeeded.

In his final peroration Mr. Newcombe said, "Mrs. Snyder has been pacing a cell crying out against her erstwhile lover. 'I hate him — I hate him. He killed my husband.' The accused man, who with his paramour connived to commit this terrible crime collapses in his cell after hours of Bible reading and many calls on the Almighty for comfort and mercy."

With dramatic emphasis Counsel read "An Open Letter to Mothers," which had been penned by Mrs. Snyder only a day or two before the closing scenes in this sensational trial.

"I know Judd Gray as well as any woman ever knows a man. He is a coward — a low, cringing, sneaking jackal — the murderer of my husband.

"He is now trying to hide behind my skirts, and is trying to drag me down into the pit that he himself willingly wallows in.

"I feel doubly sorry for Mrs. Gray now that she knows her husband could descend to such depths. He is so low and so rotten that he seeks to drag himself to safety over the body of the woman he has wronged. I hate him."

The jury found both prisoners guilty of murder in the first degree, and they were sentenced to death in the electric chair.

Then, for the first time, the "Marble Woman" cracked. She burst into tears and was seized as though by an epileptic fit as sentence was passed. Not so Judd Gray who had whined and

snivelled throughout the trial. Calmly he extracted a small prayer-book from his pocket and read from it without the least sign of emotion.

Ruth Snyder was destined to hit the front page once again. In the January 22, 1928 issue of the *New York Sunday News* there was a photograph showing her in the actual process of being electrocuted. It depicts her seated in the chair of death, her legs and arms strapped to the sides. On her head just above her blind-folded face is the metal helmet, and one can see her hands clutching the air as the death current surges through her body. It is a gruesome picture, and the paper in which it appeared, was withdrawn from circulation in this country.

It is the only unofficial photograph ever taken in the death chamber, and was obtained by an enterprising newspaper man who had a camera strapped to his ankle. By surreptitiously raising his trouser leg at the appropriate moment, he secured what was at the time claimed to be "The most talked of picture ever published."

So even in death Ruth Snyder, one of the most notorious killers of the century achieved still further notoriety.

## X

### RED WITCH OF BUCHENWALD

**B**ECAUSE of the mass of red-gold hair that shone like polished copper and wreathed her face like a halo, and because of her voluptuous figure, Ilse Koch became known as "The Red Witch of Buchenwald!" But there was nothing bewitching about the character of this German wife and mother, who had prisoners put to death in the infamous camp governed by her husband Karl, so that their tattooed skins could be made into lamp-shades to adorn her living-room!

She is now serving a life sentence for her part in the brutal atrocities at the camp, and she may count herself lucky that she did not suffer the same fate as Irma Grese, "The Beastess of Belsen," who was hanged for murdering and torturing the women prisoners in her charge. Fortunately for Ilse, the death penalty had been abolished when at length she was brought to trial before a court of her own countrymen at Augsburg, Bavaria, charged with 45 murders and complicity in 135 others.

That was in 1950-51, but it was not the first time that she had stood in a dock on similar charges, nor was it the first time that luck had favoured her in so extraordinary a manner. Three years before — in 1947 — she was tried by the American court at Nuremburg. It was during this trial that pictures of the lamp-shades made from human skin, and gloves made from the same material to the order of this cold-blooded fiend, were produced before the court. The story was also told of how human heads, shrivelled to a quarter of their normal size, had decorated the sideboard in the dining room where Ilse and her family ate their meals!

At this trial Ilse was sentenced to life imprisonment, but after

two years her release was ordered by the military governor of the U.S. Zone, General Clay. This amazing decision was the signal for a storm of protest throughout the world and President Truman called for a special investigation and report on the case. But it was held that offences of one German against another German were not covered in the definition of war crimes and General Clay's decision was not rescinded. So Ilse Koch was released (technically) on parole but she was immediately arrested by the German police to be tried by a German court.

Who was this woman who sent such a shudder of horror throughout the world as the story of her exploits was unfolded? How came it that she changed from a quiet and attractive worker in a Dresden cigarette factory to a sadistic feminine monster so lost to all sense of pity or womanhood that nothing could satisfy her lust?

Determination to escape the grinding poverty which had surrounded her from birth and an oversexed nature which demanded admiration from men brought about her early conversion to the Hitler Youth Movement with all its perverted teachings. These yearnings and her meeting with powerful, thick-set Karl Koch, a Himmler thug destined for a leading position in the Nazi Party, were the basic factors in the evolution of the Red Witch of Buchenwald.

Life in the cigarette factory entailed too much routine and too little opportunity for the restless fifteen-year-old Ilse, whose mature build made her look more like eighteen or nineteen. Young men flocked around her, and she flirted outrageously with them, but all the time she realised that they offered neither the good things of life nor the security which her soul craved.

She wanted money to spend and bright clothes to wear; she wanted to escape from the drab surroundings of her home life, and see from the inside, something of the glitter which she had only glimpsed from the outside of fashionable restaurants and hotels. Her lovely eyes were always looking out for the main chance, and one day she managed to meet the elderly owner of a prosperous book-shop. When he offered her a situation as



JULIANA LIPKA  
(see *Angel-Makers of Nagzrev*)



FOUR OF THE ANGEL-MAKERS OF NAGZREV

assistant, Ilse jumped at the opportunity. Now she might meet somebody rich; somebody who, attracted by her fresh young beauty, would take her away from the poverty she hated and give her the pleasures she craved. She did not know then that her employer specialised in the sale of books of a questionable nature; nor that he, himself, had fallen to the lure of her beauty. Not that Ilse would have minded much.

She was only a month or two past sixteen when she entered the bookshop. For hours she would be cooped up in the rather dingy premises with her aged employer, who, under the pretence of educating her in the choice of literary master-pieces gave her the most erotic books to read. These books, purposely designed to inflame the passions, were specially recommended by the Nazi leaders so that young girls and young men should be encouraged to give themselves up to each other with a resultant increase in the birthrate, and a numerical strengthening of the "master race" which was to rule the world. Not a very savoury atmosphere for a young girl to gain her first impressions of life, yet Ilse revelled in it. She detested her elderly employer, but was prepared to suffer him so long as she could remain and meet the young Hitler Storm-troopers, with their gleaming jackboots, impressive revolvers and swashbuckling air, who came to the shop.

Often there came the Nazi leaders themselves, and she gazed at them with adoring eyes. Himmler was one of those who paid most frequent visits and one day he came accompanied by a brawny, powerful looking man who simply could not take his eyes off the beautiful Ilse. Nor was the girl blind to the virile attraction of this man, but she was well versed in the art of tantalising and luring the opposite sex and because of her fine indifference, the visitor was more than ever determined to gain her attention. He clicked his heels, stood stiffly to attention, as he said something to Himmler. The latter turned and glanced towards Ilse through the narrow slits of his bespectacled eyes.

Himmler spoke rapidly to Ilse's employer, who at once called the girl over. Himmler looked her up and down as though she were for sale, appraised the ample build of her and her beauty

of countenance. Then he nodded to his companion, who took the girl's arm and led her to the rear of the shop.

"I am Karl Koch," he said. "You will come to a party with me tomorrow night. I will call for you here." To this command-invitation, Ilse beamed her acceptance, not because she had fallen in love with him, but because she realised that he must be one of the heirarchy of the Nazi Party and thus able to confer favours.

Although the avenue of escape from drudgery appeared to lie open before her, she knew also that Himmler was on the lookout for strapping young girls to become brood-mares for his sturdy S.S. men. To refuse this doubtful honour, one might be sent to a concentration camp.

So, when Karl made violent love to her at the party that night, Ilse played her cards with infinite cunning. She held him at arms' length for a time, but eventually surrendered when he told her of the important position that was coming his way. This was none other than that of Commandant of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp whither Germans who failed in their duty to the Party, or who openly flouted its orders, were sent to languish in torment until death brought them a longed-for release.

It was Himmler himself who ordered the marriage of this well-matched pair, both of whom were absolutely heedless of the sufferings of others so long as they got what they wanted. Himmler probably thought that it would look better to the outside world if the commandant of the camp was legally married and not merely living with a mistress.

The marriage took place in the year 1937. The ceremony was carried out by torchlight, and was made the occasion of great festivity among the Party members. Karl, already looked upon as an important person in the Nazi movement, was fawned upon by the less fortunate. The camp at Buchenwald was only in its infancy at this time, for the war had not begun. It consisted largely of a number of huts built in the lovely woods surrounding Weimar. But it was not to a hut that Karl took his bride.

As befitted his station, he was accommodated in a very beautiful villa, with all modern conveniences. It was well furnished, and to

who added another glorious chapter to the record of the "Master Race" by her reign of terror in Belsen Camp. Yet Ilse at her trial was true to form in the best Nazi tradition. She grovelled before her accusers. A perceptive cynic once said that "the German is either at your throat or your feet." No longer able to get at the throats of her victims, Ilse threw herself at the feet of her captors. She was alone now, for her villainous and lecherous husband had been liquidated by his Nazi companions for embezzling the money with which he had purchased his "dinner of love" in Weimar.

As she stood in the dock at Augsburg she was no longer the glamorous Ilse with the Titian hair, sparkling blue eyes and curvaceous figure. It was a slovenly hulk of corpulent flesh with bedraggled hair and ill-fitting clothes that faced the court and shot terrified glances at the warders as cries of "kill her, kill her," from the mobs outside, echoed through the hall of justice. The creature that had killed and tortured so many helpless victims with utter callousness now appealed for mercy, pleading the usual thread-worn Nazi alibi, that she knew nothing of what went on in the Camp.

"I was merely a housewife" wailed the abject wretch, "busy raising my children. I never saw anything which was against humanity." Weeping copiously she shrieked "Lies, all lies" when the revolting details of the lamp-shades were related. But the testimony of the innumerable witnesses was overwhelming, the weight of evidence staggering. In  $7\frac{1}{2}$  years, over 55,000 persons had been done to death in Buchenwald Camp, yet Ilse Koch had seen nothing.

When the accused woman realised that her doom was sealed, she abandoned the pretence of innocence and put on a superb impersonation of mental affliction. She went "dumb" and proceeded to simulate an epileptic to such good effect that her twitching body had to be carried from the dock. She was examined by a doctor in her cell and the next day he told the court that Ilse was perfectly sane, understood the proceedings completely and that she herself had admitted to him that she was putting on "a first-class comedy act." But Ilse refused to get up

from her bed and she was therefore not in court when the Judge pronounced her guilty of all charges.

"The court," said the Judge, "is in no doubt that objects including the lampshades have been made from human skin and that human heads have been shrivelled to grape-fruit size."

It was the prison doctor who told the bed-ridden prisoner that she had been condemned to prison for life. The "Witch of Buchenwald" smiled.

## XI

### FIRST ACID BATH MURDERERS

**J**OHN GEORGE HAIGH was not the first acid bath murderer. Over a quarter of a century before he resorted to this method of destroying the bodies of those he had slain, two sisters Katherine and Philomene Schmidt, with a lawyer named Sarret, had used a bath of vitriol to dispose of their victims. So the doubtful honour of being first in the field with this ghoulish practise, belongs to them and not to Haigh.

All that he might claim in his vanity — if he were still alive — is that he carried out his obliterating operations on a wider scale and with more elaborate craftsmanship. For, whereas only two of the Schmidt sister's victims were liquidated in this way, Haigh — on his own confession — had disposed of no fewer than nine bodies.

We are not, however, concerned with our own monster Haigh, but in the story of Katherine and Philomene Schmidt whose crimes in France created as great a sensation as had the crimes of "Bluebeard" Landru a few years before.

The two sisters were born in Bavaria but went to France in the year 1913, settling down in the busy sea-port of Marseilles. Katherine was a beautiful girl of eighteen at this time, with a wealth of golden hair crowning her well-poised head, cornflower-blue eyes and shapely figure. Philomene, six years her senior, was also a fine specimen of young womanhood. Fair like her sister but with brown eyes, her figure was slightly more buxom. Both had received a good education, and on their arrival in Marseilles they obtained situations as governesses. Among those who came to the house where Katherine was employed was Alexander Sarret who practised as a lawyer in the town, and was highly respected by everyone. Sarret, whose real name was Sarrajani,

was a Greek, born in Trieste. He lived there until he came to France, where he became a naturalised Frenchman, and changed his name to Sarret.

From the moment he saw Katherine, he fell in love with her although he was some twelve years older than she. He lived in a large house, the Villa Hermitage, between Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence, and thither he invited the ravishing governess who had captivated him.

Suave and charming, with all the grace of the Levantine, he was a courtly host, and Katherine soon fell beneath his spell. She had visions of marriage and a happy life with the handsome middle-aged Sarret, but the lawyer although deeply in love with the girl, had other ideas about their union. The truth was that things were not going too well with him. He had been living far beyond his means and was anxious to revive his fallen fortunes. In the fair and lovely Katherine he envisaged a means towards this end. His subtle mind was already scheming to use her for his evil purpose, although I do not believe, at this point there was any thought of murder in his heart. He was perfecting plans whereby he would be able to defraud insurance companies of thousands of pounds, sufficient to permit him to continue the life of luxury which he craved, and which had already brought about his financial difficulties.

He set out to completely win the heart of Katherine and at the same time he showed a brotherly affection for Philomene who was equally captivated by her sister's suitor. He successfully achieved his aim and Katherine became his mistress, the one condition she made, being that Philomene should also come to live with them. Sarret was only too glad to agree and the two sisters took up residence at the Villa Hermitage. An apt name as it turned out, for at least three people who sought refuge within its picturesque walls, never left it alive.

Soon after they went to live with the lawyer the sisters learned that among the clients who came to consult Sarret, were many undesirable characters, and some weeks after they had settled down in the Villa, the lawyer, confessing his

financial plight enunciated his scheme for making money.

It might have been a much happier story had I been able to relate that the two sisters horrified at his suggestions, refused to take any part in the frauds he contemplated. But they did not! By this time they were used to the rather extravagant life and liked it so much in fact, that they were as anxious as was Sarret himself that it should continue. So they fell in with his plans, lent their resourceful minds to the perfecting of every detail, and suggested improvements.

They were still Bavarians and, to further his plans, Sarret suggested that Katherine should obtain French nationality by marrying a Frenchman. "I can fix it for you," he assured her. "It will be a marriage of convenience, and you can part from your husband the moment the ceremony is over." There appeared to be little wrong with this idea, and Katherine agreed to become the bride of some unknown man who would be her spouse only in name.

But Sarret had more ambitious ideas. If his lovely sweetheart was to be sacrificed on the matrimonial altar, even though only temporarily, why not make it a business transaction as well? He worked out the details and then talked it over with the sisters Schmidt, who agreed that it was a wonderful idea.

Discreetly the lawyer sought out a consumptive sailor named Deltreuil. The poor fellow had been discharged as hopelessly incurable, and was living in poverty in one of the lowest quarters in Marseilles. For a few hundred francs he agreed to "marry" Katherine, but he did not know that his life had been insured for a hundred thousand francs.

You may wonder how a policy could have been issued on an obviously dying man, but Sarret had planned it well. He roped in one of his low down hangers-on, an ex-priest name Chambon who had been unfrocked because of immoral practices. Chambon was a healthy and vigorous man living with his mistress Noémie Ballandraux, the woman responsible for the loss of his priesthood. Ever in need of money to satisfy the demands of his mistress, Chambon readily consented to take Deltreuil's place before the

doctor of the insurance company, and he was promptly passed as a first class life.

The marriage of convenience having taken place, Katherine was now legally a Frenchwoman, so it was simply a question of time before the conspirators could reap the harvest of their cunning plan.

A few months elapsed and then Deltreuil died. Katherine attended the funeral suitably attired in the garb of a sorrowing widow, and in due course the insurance company paid out the insurance money. The three confederates rubbed their greedy hands together. It was all too easy! So simple — like taking money out of a blind man's tin.

They embarked on a wild spending spree for a few days and then, suddenly, Chambon the unfrocked priest appeared at the Villa Hermitage.

"I thought you'd like to see me again," he intoned with an insolent grin. "Can I come in?"

He entered and seated himself in the most comfortable chair in the lounge. "I also decided that I was entitled to some of the insurance money," he remarked with a casual air.

Sarret looked grim. "So it's blackmail," he hissed.

Chambon spread out his hands in a deprecating gesture. "A nasty word," he remarked, "but, I want money all the same."

There was nothing for it! He had to be paid, and for the next few weeks he levied his toll regularly, remorselessly. He knew he had but to ask and it would be forthcoming.

Then he sprang another surprise. "I think I'll come and live" here," he calmly announced one day. "I like the surroundings, the peace and quiet, and (sardonically) the pleasant company. I'm sure you can find a room for Nœmie and myself. We shall not be any trouble I assure you."

Sarret gazed at the man with anger and hatred. He was helpless and he knew it. Then suddenly there flashed across his mind a way out . . . an escape from the demands of Chambon for ever.

"Of course, my dear fellow," he said. "We shall be only too happy to have you. Give us just a day or two to make the necessary arrangements and come along."

"I'll be along on Monday morning to see if I approve," said Chambon, "and Nœmie can come along later in the afternoon."

"That will suit us perfectly," replied the genial Sarret.

The respite of three days was exactly what Sarret needed. It would give him time to perfect the gruesome plot he had in mind. When Katherine chided him for agreeing to let the ex-priest and his mistress come to live with them, he smiled enigmatically and then told her his plan.

"Wonderful!" ejaculated Katherine admiringly, and at once set to work to play her part. First she went into Marseilles and ordered a large full-length bath to be sent to Hermitage Villa. Sarret then purchased a hundred litres of sulphuric acid. A litre is roughly a quart so there would be something like 25 gallons of this deadly searing liquid and about half this was poured into the bath which had been set in a secluded part of the garden. The scene was now all ready.

Chambon arrived on the Monday morning; he was received effusively, and no suspicion was aroused in his mind when the noisy clatter of a motor-cycle being started up in the front drive of the house assailed his ears. This was Philomene's role in the tragedy, for while the noise was in full blast, and while Katherine gaged Chambon in friendly conversation, Sarret fired a revolver from behind a screen sending a bullet into the brain of the unsuspecting ex-priest.

His body was hurriedly removed to the garden and dumped into the bath of vitriol. The engine of the motor-cycle stopped running and a sinister quiet descended over the villa. The three then spruced themselves up enjoyed a very good lunch and awaited the arrival of Nœmie Ballandraux.

She came about 2.30 p.m. Philomene was tinkering with the motor-cycle in the drive, but paused to wave a welcome to the visitor. Then the engine started up and reached a crescendo of shattering reports as Nœmie entered the front door. Sarret fired a shot straight through the head of the woman who had come to join the family circle and she fell lifeless to the floor. A few minutes later she had joined her lover in the acid bath, the remainder of

the vitriol being poured over her as she lay almost in the dead arms of Chambon.

Within a few days the bodies were almost totally destroyed and the residue from the bath was poured over the garden.

The disappearance of Chambon and his mistress aroused no local comment or enquiries. It was thought they had simply migrated to some other part of France.

Relieved for all time of the blackmail menace, Sarret and the two sisters now decided to develop their insurance scheme. Once more the astute brain of Sarret was responsible for the main plan, but both Katherine and Philomene proved helpful with suggestions for perfecting the arrangements.

The trio moved to Marseilles where the two women began to visit various hospitals on the pretext of solicitude for the lonely sick, who had neither friends nor relatives to visit them. They were welcome indeed and soon they had a number of patients to whom they regularly took small luxuries in the way of food. They paid particular attention to the inmates of tuberculous wards, and finally they concentrated on a woman named Lorenzi, who was in a very advanced stage of the disease. They were kindness itself to the dying woman, and she at any rate derived some benefit from the nefarious scheme in which she was to be an innocent partner, for they certainly cheered her last weeks of her life.

Believing that her charming visitors would help her to be sent to Switzerland for special treatment, Lorenzi handed over to them her identity papers. With these they were able to present another woman for examination before the doctor of the insurance company insuring her for a million francs in the name of the sick Lorenzi.

A will was drawn up by the lawyer which left everything that Lorenzi possessed, to "her dear friends" the Schmidt sisters. The will bore the same signature as did the insurance proposal form — that of the "stooge" who had impersonated the dying woman in the insurance doctor's surgery.

Every step in the fraud had been meticulously planned, and it

was palpably foolproof. Sarrêt, Katherine and Philomene had merely to sit and wait for the moment when they could collect.

Unfortunately however, Mme Lorenzi had died a little too quickly after the policy had been issued and the first premium paid. The lamented demise was, in fact, within ten days and the insurance company officials were puzzled. How could a woman, in the flush of vigorous health at the time of her medical examination, be seized with tuberculosis and die so speedily as Lorenzi had done? Of course they had heard of galloping consumption, but there was no record of a gallop quite so quick and fatal as this.

Things began to look awkward for Sarret and company, but the lawyer was an adept at wriggling out of difficulties. As the lawyer of the Schmidt sisters he wrote to the insurance company stating that his clients had generously abandoned any claims to the insurance money in view of the fact that the policy had been in existence such a short time. The conspirators must have breathed a great sigh of relief when the company intimated that they accepted the public-spirited decision of the sisters.

This narrow escape did not deter them in their intentions to continue the insurance racket but they decided to vary the procedure by an infinitely more daring scheme than any which had gone before. The sisters still carried out their mercy visits to the hospitals where they were almost idolised for the kindness they showered upon the hapless patients.

— Their defeat over the Lorenzi claim seemed to act as a stimulus rather than a deterrent, and they now became more ambitious in the stakes they played for. This time Katherine Schmidt presented herself for medical examination in connection with a policy for one million seven hundred thousand francs on her own life, and Katherine, as beautiful as ever and splendidly healthy, was accepted without demur by the company as a first-class life.

Although this was a reversal of the process previously employed there was no altruistic intention on Katherine's part of providing her lover and sister with over a million-and-a-half francs by conveniently dying, so it became necessary to find a

deputy. Once more she and Philomene attended the hospitals this time to find a victim who would not pass away quite so quickly as poor Lorenzi had done.

Among the patients they discovered a case ideally suited to their plans, a twenty-four-year-old girl named Magali Herbin, who had been ill for a long time but whom the doctors thought might survive for some months provided she received proper care and attention. The two sisters, so popular with the hospital authorities throughout Marseilles, offered to take Mlle Herbin their own home where, they assured the matron, she would be well cared for. In the spacious garden of their home she would get all the benefits of fresh air so essential to recovery in a case of this kind!

The young woman, eager to escape from her depressing surroundings gladly accompanied her patrons to their pleasant home, where under their kindly ministrations she improved greatly. She was attended by a Doctor Maurice Guy and so much better did she become that she was able to visit the hospital where formerly she had been a patient, and thus give living proof of the virtue of her friends and the treatment she had received at their hands.

All of which was the perfect alibi for anything that might arise in the future. Months went by and the sisters, a little alarmed by the continued progress of their charge introduced her to a life of pleasure and gaiety which they hoped would bring about a relapse. But they had done their work too well, and the high life had no visible effect on the health of Magali Herbin.

Sarret therefore decided things must be speeded up, so into a bottle of champagne with which the girl was plied one night, he discreetly dropped quick-acting poison. By the morning, Mlle Herbin was dead. Dr. Guy was called in and had no hesitation in signing the death certificate.

It now became necessary to arrange the switch of identities between Magali Herbin and Katherine Schmidt, since it was Katherine's life which was insured, and to all intents and purposes it was Katherine who must be buried.

Katherine therefore quietly took her departure from the Villa Hermitage, making for Nice where she put up at an unobtrusive but nevertheless luxurious hotel, the while Magali's body was placed in the coffin bearing Katherine's name, and taken to the cemetery. There, with Philomene a distraught and weeping mourner, Mdlle Herbin was interred as Katherine Schmidt. No awkward questions were asked when Sarret, on behalf of Philomene as next of kin to her sister, applied for the insurance money. Meanwhile Katherine, under an assumed name was disporting herself amidst the pleasures of Nice, and thoroughly enjoying herself, the more so because she was relieved of the company of Sarret. During the past months her affection for the lawyer had waned, and, although she was unable, for obvious reasons to resist his demands to take part in the frauds which he engineered, she had now become scared of his diabolical determination to secure his ends, and she was glad to be away from him.

But there was another reason for her desire to be rid of her lover. Staying at the hotel was a visitor from Marseilles, one M. Gregoire, a handsome dashing man who was violently attracted by Katherine's loveliness, and before he was due to return to his business in Marseilles, the pair had become lovers. Much as she would have liked to break her association with Sarret and take up life with her new lover, Katherine was afraid. Anyway, she was "dead" so far as "Katherine Schmidt" was concerned, and must remain in exile, pleasant though an exile in that playground of the South of France can be.

Gregoire wrote her letters that burned with passion and held out alluring possibilities, and he made daily telephone calls in which he begged her to join him in Marseilles.

Life plays strange tricks on people. It was love for Sarret which led Katherine into crime, and it was love for Gregoire that led her eventually into the dock of Aix-en-Provence to stand side by side with her former lover and sister Philomene on a charge of triple murder. Her yearning for the arms of Gregoire proved too strong for her. She wanted to forget the past, to let "Katherine Schmidt" lay peacefully in her grave and seek permanent happiness

with the man she now loved beyond everything else in the world.

Katherine was convinced her true identity was unlikely to be revealed and so without telling Sarret her intentions she joined Gregoire in Marseilles. She avoided all places where the remotest possibility of her being recognised might exist. "I am content to spend my life with you," she told her lover, "Life outside our home means nothing to me."

They took their meals at quaint, little-frequented restaurants and cafes. And it was in one of these that Katherine one day was horrified to observe a woman, whose face was strangely familiar, staring fixedly at her. It was a hospital nurse who had seen Katherine too often to be mistaken in her recognition. Yet so far as the nurse knew Katherine Schmidt had died some months ago. She had heard the news from Philomene and remembering the kindness of both sisters in visiting the sick, the nurse had been distressed by the sad news. But here, in a small cafe was Katherine Schmidt, very much alive. That chance meeting proved Katherine's undoing. The secret was out! Enquiries soon led to the uncovering of the insurance frauds, and Katherine was arrested. As soon as this became known Philomene surrendered to the police and together the sisters confessed the full extent of their crimes, naming George Sarret as the evil mentor who had pressed them into his murderous service.

Sarret was arrested and in October 1933 eight prisoners were arraigned in the Assize Court at Aix on charges of murder, defrauding insurance companies and complicity. They were Sarret and the two sisters, Sarret's daughter, Doctor Maurice Guy, a former deputy Mayor of Marseilles, who had fallen into the clutches of the lawyer, a cook who had impersonated Lorenzi, and two insurance agents whom Sarret had bribed to assist him in his swindles.

As so often happens in such cases, the three chief prisoners sought to blame each other. Sarret pleaded that Chambon had shot his mistress Noémie Ballandrauz in a jealous rage, and that he (Sarret) had accidentally shot Chambon while trying to wrest the revolver from his hands.

But the President of the Court lifted an enquiring eye as he asked about the acid bath. The lawyer had a ready tongue. "The Schmidt sisters would not let me send for the police," he lied, "and they insisted on dissolving the two bodies in vitriol."

The two sisters had a different story to tell. They had been forced under threat of death, to comply with all that Sarret demanded of them, and they told how he shot both Chambon and his mistress. Katherine agreed that she helped dump the bodies in the acid bath, but only because Sarret threatened her.

The most intriguing story of the whole trial was that told by Mme Lambert who kept the hotel in Nice where Katherine stayed after the death of Magali Herbin. She described how Sarret when he called there would reduce her guest to a state of abject terror by simply swinging to and fro before her eyes, a gold watch dangling at the end of a chain.

"I gathered that he was her business agent," Mme Lambert told the court, "but I could not understand her strange fear of him, even when he talked to her on the 'phone. When M. Gregoire spoke with her, she appeared perfectly happy, but whenever she spoke to Sarret she became miserable and depressed. On the occasions when he came to see her she was distracted."

"During these visits" the witness continued, "Sarret would take out a gold watch and swing it back and forth in front of the prisoner. This action seemed to terrify her. . . ."

Sarret interposed from the dock, "It was because I always had to catch a train and I had to know the time."

"Nonsense. The watch had a closed case and you never opened it," retorted the witness.

The President of the Court took the watch and held it up for all to see. Then he turned to Katherine. "This watch?" he asked, and the woman nodded.

"Yes! It is true . . . . He always did that because he knew what it meant to me. It was Chambon's watch which he took from him after the shooting. . . . I was terrified whenever I saw it."

The watch was handed to Sarret, who with absolute non-

chalance swung it to and fro as quietly said, "Yes. It is Chambon's watch. Katherine gave it to me."

Anger burned in the eyes of the woman sitting next to him in the dock. "I give Georges Sarret a second-hand watch?" she cried in scathing tones. "He lies — he took it from the pocket of the man he shot in cold blood, before we placed him in the bath."

But all these attempts to shift the burden of guilt from one pair of shoulders to another failed miserably. Sarret and the two sisters were found guilty, the other prisoners were acquitted. The lawyer was sentenced to death but the two women received, what might be considered a mild sentence for such diabolical crimes. They were sentenced to ten years' imprisonment with a further ten years banishment.

Thus it was that they won their places in the annals of crime as the first acid bath murderers.

## XII

### THE POISON WIDOW OF LIÈGE

AT one moment a gentle-voiced woman, the next, a steel-hearted killer, Marie Alexandrine Becker was one of those Jekyll and Hyde personalities who flit across the criminal horizon from time to time. Outwardly a quiet little white-haired widow of kindly mien, with bright smiling eyes, there was nothing about this fifty-nine-year-old woman to indicate that she had committed twelve cold-blooded murders, all by poisoning and ten within the space of three years.

Ten of those she slew were women getting on in years, which was just a matter of discriminate selection of her part, for she benefited from all their deaths. Her two male victims were her husband Charles Becker and one of her lovers, Lambert Beyer. Oh yes, the little widow rejoiced in quite a few lovers long after she had reached her faded fifties, and this was perhaps one of the strangest disclosures of the many that emerged at her trial in the peaceful Belgium township of Liège. It came out, indeed, that some of her later murders were committed in order that she could obtain money to lavish on her latest conquest, a man named Hody, some twenty years younger than herself. She squandered so much money in leading a gay life with this lover, that she herself lived in penury.

It was a "late-in-life" straying from the straight and narrow path for Marie Becker, in both the romantic and criminal fields. She had turned fifty-three before she took her first lover and poisoned her husband. That was in the year 1932. Her progress in villainy after that, was very rapid. She was truly "a fast worker," for within a three year span, she deliberately and methodically murdered eleven other victims. The casualty list reads as follows:—

Marie Doupagne, died March 1933,  
Lambert Boyer, died November 1934,  
Julia Bossy, died March 1935,  
Widow Perot, died May 1935,  
Aline Louis-Damont, died May 1935,  
Mme Castadot, died July 1935,  
Widow Lambert, died September 1935,  
Widow Crulle, died November 1935,  
Anne Stevart, died May 1936,  
Widow Bultay, died September 1936,  
Widow Lange, died September 1936.

I should mention here that she also *attempted* to poison three other persons including her own cousin, and in addition she had committed crimes of theft, fraud, and embezzlement. Altogether a busy little woman. Rarely in the history of crime has there been recorded such a sudden transition from home-loving wife to callous murderess as that of Marie Becker. When she first settled down in Liège with her cabinet-maker husband, she was a typical industrious housewife. "A most pleasant little person," declared a neighbour who knew her well. "Always ready to lend a helping hand with the children if one wanted to go out, and as kindly a soul as ever lived. I have known her do all the housework of a friend who was taken ill, and if ever the little ones were sick it was always Marie Becker who would be called to tend them or give advice. I sometimes think that had she had children of her own this terrible thing would never have happened."

It is difficult to say. The medical experts who were called in to examine Marie before she faced trial, paid due consideration to the peculiarities which afflict some women after the change of life, but this could not account for the wholesale lust for killing which had suddenly gripped this exemplary wife. Something however had caused this terrible aberration, and to my mind it was passion coming to her late in life that hurled her off her balance.

It was just at the beginning of the vital year 1932, that she first met 46-year-old Lambert Beyer. He was a bachelor, not bad looking for a middle-aged man and possessed of a certain gallantry

of manner which appealed to the quiet-living little woman over whom he towered in stature. Charles, her husband, although an exquisite craftsman, was unspectacular in appearance and colourless in character. Romance thus came into the life of Marie and from the moment she fell in love with Lambert, probably the first ecstasy she had ever known, she decided that husband Charles was in the way, and must be eliminated.

What part her lover played in this resolve to liquidate the husband we shall never know, for, ironically enough, the time was to come when he himself stood in the way of another of Marie's romances and consequently he forfeited his life at his sweetheart's tiny hands. And—dead men tell no tales.

So it may have been entirely Marie's own idea. The fact remains that in the autumn of 1932, husband Charles Becker died and was laid to rest with becoming sorrow by his widow. No suspicion attached to his death, and not until four years later, when his body was exhumed, did it become known that he had died, not from cancer as was supposed, but from digitalis poisoning.

The funeral over, neighbours of the widow were not a little surprised to note how quickly she seemed to recover from her grief. This surprise gave way to disgust when Marie Becker, the demure little widow suddenly took to a life of frivolity, frequenting dance halls and clubs in the company of men young enough to be her sons.

"Whoever would have thought it!" whispered the scandalised neighbours, as they heard sounds of revelry in the home of the widow, and watched man after man entering those hitherto quiet portals. "Where does she get her money from?" they questioned. And well they might, for Marie had not been left too well off when her husband died, apart from the very welcome insurance money.

To eke out her meagre finances she took up dressmaking, being rather clever with her fingers and by this means she came into contact with people who could afford to have clothes made to order. She cultivated their friendship to such an extent that she was invited to their homes. Among her clientele were a number

of elderly women for whom Marie skilfully designed gowns and dresses which flattered them. In this way she wormed her way into their confidence and when they were unwell, as these elderly ladies often were, it was to their kindly dressmaker they turned for care and comfort.

One of them, Mme Doupagne, gratefully accepted Marie's offer to recuperate at her home. "I shall be able to give you more attention and look after you better if I have you under my eye," explained Marie.

So in January 1933, the elderly customer moved in to the little villa where her dressmaker lived and no trained nurse could have shown greater desire to speed the recovery of a patient than did Marie Becker. Indeed so attentive was she that Madame Doupagne insisted upon making a will in favour of her devoted friend. Not that she had a great deal to leave, but it would be sufficient to enable Marie to buy the favours of Beyer and her other lovers.

Maybe it was the subsequent knowledge that she would benefit from the death of her patient which first put the idea of murder into Marie's heart. On the other hand, she may have premeditated it when she invited the old lady to her home. Whenever it was that she resolved on her wicked project, the fact remains that in March, just two months after she had entered the Becker villa, Mme Doupagne was carried out on her last earthly journey—to the cemetery. She had suffered from some disturbance of the digestive tract, so the doctor attending her had no reason to suspect anything but natural causes when she passed away and he duly provided a death certificate in accordance with his knowledge of the case.

Meanwhile the love affair between Marie Becker and Lambert Beyer was beginning to wane. With the money she obtained under the will of Mme Doupagne, Marie flung herself into a new orgy of pleasure-seeking and thus she met M. Hoby, who, though considerably younger than the merry widow, found her attractive enough to become her lover. But Beyer could not be shaken off, which was a source of annoyance to his erstwhile sweetheart who by this time was madly in love with the younger man, there

was only one thing for it, reasoned Marie, she must get rid of Beyer. Her husband had proved no problem nor had the old lady whom she had nursed—and poisoned.

With infinite cunning, she played her cards. She simulated a greater passion than ever for her unwanted lover, and he, in the seventh heaven of delight, never dreamed that this excess of love was but the prelude to his doom. In November 1934 the unfortunate Lambert Beyer died from epigastric troubles which had refused to yield to the treatment of his doctor, and such wealth as he possessed was left to his grieving Marie.

Now she was free to carry on her affair with M. Hody to her hearts content, but this required money, and at the rate she was squandering it the legacy left her by Beyer, would not last long. Once more—or rather *nine times* more—she sought fresh funds by the well-tried method she knew. So far it had certainly been *very* easy, and now as her need for money increased Marie sped her victims to their deaths. Sped is the operative word if you will refer to the list of murders already set out above. Lambert Beyer died in November 1934.

Four months after Beyer's demise Julia perished at the hands of Marie Becker and between March and November of that same year, five more women were sent to their graves by the black widow. Between May and October 1936, she despatched three more and from all nine she received legacies of varying amounts.

This wholesale poisoning might have gone on indefinitely had Marie not at last overplayed her hand. Suspicion was first aroused when a Mme Guichner confided to Marie that she wanted to be completely free of her husband from whom she was already parted. Marie proffered some expert advice. "If you want to poison your husband" she said, "I can give you a powder to leave no trace; death appears to be quite natural . . ."

Mme Guichner did not avail herself of the eminently practical offer, but strangely enough she, herself, was later seized with pains in the stomach accompanied by other unpleasant symptoms. She became suspicious about Marie and told a friend who in turn

went to the police. Curiously, the police had just received an anonymous letter making charges against Marie concerning the death of Mme Castadot. It did not take the police long to reveal the trail of corpses which had followed in the wake of Marie's nursing. She was arrested and in her handbag was found a phial containing digitalis, a poison which would produce such symptoms as those from which her many victims died.

Marie explained that the drug was for her own use as she suffered from heart condition. She named a doctor who had prescribed it but he denied ever having seen Marie, whose heart, incidentally, was found to be perfect—though black!

She came to a trial in the picturesque 16th century Palace of Justice at Liège, and nobody in that ancient building appeared more serene than the white-haired widow who calmly listened to the recital of her crimes as outlined by the prosecution. It sounded like an extract from a mystery thriller.

M. Desthexe, the examining magistrate, related how by various means Marie had scraped acquaintances with elderly women and later became their nurse. While she was nursing them she was also robbing them.

"Mme Becker," the prosecutor stated, "always attended her victim's funerals dressed in deepest mourning and weeping bitterly." The reader will recall that in almost all the cases dealt with in these chapters, the female murderers have invariably stood at the gravesides of their victims, arrayed in the garments of woe. No doubt the psychiatrists can explain this quirk.

The court proceedings at Marie's trial were enlivened by the incessant whirr and click of cameras and the glare of exploding flash-bulbs. Several of the twenty odd photographers stood right next to the dock and blazed away at the woman who sat there with hands resting upon her lap. Others stood on benches a few yards from the judges. The presiding judge and President of the Assize was M. Fettweis. He wore a scarlet cloak over his black robes while across his chest was a glittering array of decorations and medals. He was flanked on either side by two assistant judges garbed in sombre black. As they entered the court Marie Becker

bobbed a respectful curtsey from the dock then resumed her stand between two gendarmes who dwarfed her diminutive figure.

During the selection of the jury, people struggled and pushed to gain admission to the court. It was all very informal and easy except for the public who were crowded like sardines. Many peered through field glasses at the woman in the dock; artists plied their pencils, sketching judges, counsel and the prisoner. And through it all Marie Becker maintained an air of absolute composure.

Twenty-four jurymen were called to the front of the court. Twelve were selected by drawing lots, three "reserves" also being drawn. In those days jurymen were not kept in confinement during the three weeks trial, but left the court at the end of the day with the President's admonition ringing in their ears, "Above all gentlemen, no imprudence."

As soon as the jury had taken their places, the Clerk of the Court read out the 12,000 word indictment in French at machine-gun-like speed, and in unemotional tones. French had been chosen instead of Flemish by counsel for the defence, whose prerogative it was, and while the catalogue of her crimes was being read the prisoner listened impassively with an almost detached expression on her face.

She heard the examining magistrate describe her as "a person of intelligence and amiability, a flatterer, extremely shrewd, a real comedian knowing how to laugh and cry, one capable of manœuvring her public with marvellous art." She also heard him refer to her as a "particularly perverted creature." But Marie appeared not the least bit interested in the epithets directed against her. She displayed no emotion whatsoever, not even when her counsel protested vehemently against a copy of the damning indictment being distributed to the jury. He claimed that this unusual step must inevitably bias them and counter-attacked by distributing to the jurors copies of his own opening speech on behalf of the prisoner.

Only once did Marie raise her voice. That was when she denied having affairs with several men. She was rather emphatic in her

denials then, but not quite so certain on the point as the trial progressed and the evidence proved that she had indeed promiscuously wandered along the paths of romances.

When asked by the President why she had obtained so much poison, Marie changed her story that it had been prescribed for heart weakness, declaring she had sold it to someone to obtain cash.

"Who to?" demanded the President.

"To a Dutch friend—a Mme Baumens." Unfortunately she could not remember her Dutch friend's address whereupon the President turned to the Press-men in court with the remark:—"I hope that the International Press, particularly the Dutch representatives here, will help us trace this mysterious friend." The "friend" was never found.

There was a moment of hilarity in the macabre proceedings when the prisoner in answer to the question how Mme Lambert had died, replied, "like an angel choked by sauerkraut." The vision of an angel being choked by sauerkraut was too much for the public and roars of laughter echoed in the court.

"How did Madame Castadot die?" was another question put to the accused.

"Beautifully," replied this amazing woman, adding, "She lay flat out on her back."

Her counsel, at this point, rose and addressed the judges. "M. President," he said, "Will you please tell the court who inquired into the death of Mme Castadot?"

There was a startled murmur as the President answered, "M. Castadot." The significance of this statement was that, M. Castadot, the husband of the dead woman, was on the staff of the police at Liège and it was alleged that after his wife's death he became the lover of Marie Becket.

Marie was questioned by her counsel on this point.

"Is it true that M. Castadot became your lover?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"When did the relationship cease?"

"When I found him in compromising circumstances with

another woman." There was a pause before the prisoner went on to say that it was because she had given him up that M. Castadot "acted spitefully" towards her and wrote the anonymous letter which led to her arrest.

Several times she contested statements against her until the President remarked, "Everybody in the case except you then is lying?"

"Yes," was the immediate and unblushing response. This followed the enquiry into Marie's love affairs. "Was there not also a certain non-commissioned officer who became your lover?" asked the President.

Up rose counsel for Becker, to suggest that the relationship between this man and his client was not known, whereupon the President drily remarked "When a woman goes out at night with an N.C.O. it is not usually for the purpose of having her teeth counted."

When Counsel for the defence urged that it was ridiculous to suggest the accused had used digitalis to poison her victims, since they could not have failed to taste it, the President ordered a startling test to be made. Experts prepared twelve cups of cold tea in which they put just sufficient digitalis to give it a taste. The cups containing the poison were then handed round to each member of the jury. As the tray was passed round none of the jurors accepted the offer of the sinister refreshment until it reached the foreman, who put out an uncertain hand, took the cup, sniffed it and then drank from it with a fatalistic grin. Thus encouraged, the other jurors took their cups and reluctantly sipped the tea. Asked for their views on the matter, they all agreed that it tasted like "very bitter tea."

On July 8, over three weeks after her trial began, Marie was found guilty. For the first time in her long ordeal, she faltered as she moved to the front of the dock to hear her sentence. Asked whether she had anything to say, she leaned against the rail and murmured in a weak and unsteady voice, "I thank my advocates for their devotion and I declare to you that I am innocent."

Sentence of death was then passed, but as there is no capital

punishment in Belgium it meant that Marie would spend the rest of her days in prison, no doubt reflecting on the folly of love that comes too late in life.

### XIII

## ANGEL-MAKERS OF NAGZREV

THIS is not the story of one bad woman, but rather the story of a number of bad women — some fifty in all — who were responsible for a carnage of mass killing in which husbands, lovers, children and relatives were done to death without scruple or mercy. It was a *community* of murderesses who flourished in the remote Hungarian villages of Nagzrev and Tizsakurt and who rained death over the Valley of the Theiss. Fully to appreciate the nature of their murderous exploits it will be as well to get a bird's eye view of the setting for what can only be described as the most amazing poisoning drama the world has ever known.

Nagzrev is a settlement, five centuries old, situated on the largest tributary of the Danube, against a background of the broad rolling plains of Hungary, a smiling land of pastures and peasants where little has changed since it became the first home of the Asiatic Huns and the cradle of modern Europe.

Imagine the lonely little homesteads set amidst the wild vast plains, separated by miles of cornfields, self-contained, and self-ruled, with men and women living and dying in the shadow of their own homes. I do not know what the place is like now, but in 1929 there was not even a church within miles of the twin villages of Nagzrev and Tizsakurt. They had no doctor, no hospital, not even a trained nurse, only a few ancient crones who practised unhygienic midwifery and home cures and were called the "wise women." But their wisdom consisted only in preying on the ignorant folk who came to consult them. They were regarded with superstitious awe, and they played up to the beliefs which they had encouraged. Their homes were at once the village club, and the chemists shops where the sick bought drugs. They

were also the beauty parlours where a love-sick girl could buy a "potion" to win her lover. The "wise women" combined the offices of nurse, confidante, and gossip-in-chief, called in at every birth, and summoned to perform the last rites in death, these dispensers of primitive medicines and wierd love-potions were the modern equivalent of the Zulu witch doctor.

Farming was the main industry of these two villages, but the 1914-18 war devastated large areas of Hungary and after the conflict there had not been enough to go round. Land was precious, so precious indeed that the aged owners grimly held on to their acres and only death would bring about a change of ownership. The centuries old law of single inheritance rendered more than one child, superfluous, since it meant another mouth to feed and here the "midwife" had a useful role to play. These harpies had literally the power of life and death in the little communities they served, for the demise of children and even of elders and husbands, meant more land for the women who were left behind.

Thus, in return for some paltry gift — for the midwives were by no means gold-diggers in the modern sense of the word — the wise women would readily smother an unwanted child at birth, supply a "charm powder" for the removal of a husband who had served his purpose or provide the means for any other "removal job" that might be required. The ease with which the dispatch of the unwanted could be encompassed, gradually bred in the community a callous indifference to murder, while the lust for land became stronger than family ties. The axiom that blood is thicker than water did not mean much in the Theiss Valley, where murder and immorality stalked side by side from the year 1911, the year the first murder was discovered, until 1927 when the last crime was committed. Women indulged in an orgy of free love, interchanging their paramours without shame or compunction.

The village graveyards were full of men, women and children who had been murdered by arsenical poisoning obtained by steeping flypapers in water. How long these internicine murders might have gone on is beyond conjecture, for it was not until a

young medical student decided to analyse the organs of a body washed up on the banks of the Tisza, that suspicions were aroused in the minds of the authorities. That chance analysis revealed the presence of an inordinate amount of arsenic in the body, and the police at once started enquiries as a result of which the bodies of Josef Nadarasz and Michæk Szabo were exhumed. It was found that they too had died from large doses of arsenic.

Suspicion fell on two midwives of the district, Susanna Olah (known as "the White Witch of Nagzrev") and Frau Julius Fazekas. Anonymous letters to the police accused another midwife, Papy, of distributing arsenic to her customers. It soon became apparent to the authorities that they had uncovered a murder racket the like of which only a fiction writer could think up. The first woman pulled in by the police set the trial blazing. She confessed to a string of killings, the poison for which had been obligingly supplied by Frau Fazekas. The latter was obviously public enemy No. 1, so the police played a hunch on Frau Fazekas that paid off handsomely. They picked her up and after a thorough grilling, during which she denied everything, they let her go and, as the police anticipated she promptly went to the homes of all her "customers" warning them that the game was up and terrifying them with dire threats if they dared to betray her. Hard on the heels of Frau Fazekas making her frantic calls were the detectives and thus in one grand round-up they were able to pull in every woman who had "done business" with the purveyor of poison. All unsuspecting, Frau Fazekas returned to her home but two days later when the police arrived to take her in she lifted the poisoned chalice to her own lips and joined the host of fellow-villagers whom she had sped to the better land. A search of the evil-smelling den in which she had lived disclosed a vast pile of fly-papers ready for the sinister brew which had been Frau Fazekas' *specialité de la maison*.

Cheated of the arch-villainess of this appalling drama the police then went after another leading character, "Susie" Olah. She was something out of Shakespeare's famous tableau, for "Susie" was a frightening figure with piercing black eyes that

glowed ruby-red at night. She lived in a hut with a fearsome collection of snakes and lizards which she trained to creep into the beds of her intended victims. To such a pitch can guilt and superstition bring human beings that some who were visited by these noisome reptiles believed they were bewitched and went mad.

The police found Susie Olah with her seventy-year-old sister Rosa Sebestyen, an old hag who acted as a go-between in negotiations with the former's clients. It was Rosa who passed on to Lydia Holyba, the arsenic with which she poisoned her ill-tempered ailing husband. This was a typical murder.

Husband Holyba was a sour-natured, dyspeptic man, who lay abed when he should have been working in the fields. A piece of land had to be sold to pay his debts, and this was considered the worst crime of which a husband could be capable. A desire for vengeance began to smoulder in Lydia Holyba's breast and when a handsome young labourer started to pay her court, her resentment against her useless husband flamed up.

For forty Hungarian pence she bought a packet of arsenic from Frau Sebestyen which she gave to her husband in a cup of coffee. He died in dire agony as do all victims of arsenical poisoning.

A particularly vile creature in this rustic horror was Juliana Lipka who confessed to no fewer than seven murders. In 1912 she poisoned her aunt whose savings, cottage and plot of land came to her through inheritance; nine years later her uncle followed the aunt to his grave and Juliana duly inherited his property too. Her stepmother, brother and sister-in-law were the next to be hurried out of the world, and their property also became hers. She finally achieved complete control of the family lands by the despatch of her own husband and another male relation. This harridan had hopes of marrying a young fellow of twenty-four despite her age and the fact that she was black-browed, pock-marked, squat and shapeless, with a most evil expression.

Another of the village women who admitted buying a "potion" from the midwife Olah, was more resourceful in her defence.

She declared that she genuinely believed that the "medicine" she obtained would cure her husband of his drinking habits, which of course it did. He died within a few hours of taking the stuff.

More exhumations were made and more arrests followed, but the work of the police was hampered by the fact that gravestones had been swopped over, either by the prisoners before their arrest or by their accomplices, to the graves of persons who had died natural deaths. Many of the corpses unearthed contained enough arsenic to poison twenty men, and eventually over fifty women, young and old, were arrested in connection with the crimes.

Some of the stories told by the women when they reported the deaths of their husbands lacked nothing in subtlety or ingenuity. One declared: "My man was never the same when he came back from the war. He had trouble which got worse and worse until he died." And the quaint old village "coroner," as ignorant of the first principles of law as he was of medicine, would fumble for his pen and scrawl out a certificate of death.

The whole dread story of the family murders was unfolded at the trials of the fifty women who were described as "The Angel-Makers of Nagzrev." The proceedings held at the Szolnok Assize court, were spread over several months, and eventually some of the prisoners were sentenced to death and others sent to prison for life. There was only one prisoner who evoked some degree of sympathy, Elizabeth Molnar the twenty-year-old widow of Franz Molnar whom she was charged with murdering. It may provide a little light relief if I tell more fully how Elizabeth came to find herself in the dock, for she was vastly different from the other women on trial.

Elizabeth Molnar possessed a slimness and grace which not even the thick, heavy garb of the peasant could hide, and her pale face with its frame of raven ringlets and crowned with the traditional head-dress presented a picture of haunting sadness. It was not a pose. Elizabeth was a native of the village of Tizsakurt, and at 17 she was the beauty of the place. She was carried off her feet by the tempestuous wooing of a youth named Molnar, the son of a small but quite well-to-do landowner in the neighbouring village

of Nagzrev. He was a handsome young fellow this Molnar, and at the village dance that had followed the gathering of the harvest he cut a dashing figure, in his quaint traditional costume, which Elizabeth found irresistible. At first the marriage was happy enough, but before many months had passed shadows began to cloud the lustrous eyes of the girl-wife. Franz noted it but to his oft-repeated questions the girl assured him that nothing was worrying her.

But there was! A young villager of Tizsakurt with whom she had been more than friendly when Franz first appeared on the scene, had resented the abrupt termination of his association with Elizabeth. The disappointed suitor, Palinkas by name, quickly made it clear that he had no intention of being summarily dismissed. He crept up to the house one day while Franz and others of the household were busy in the fields and bluntly demanded that Elizabeth should still remain his sweetheart. He threatened to reveal certain imaginary secrets of their youthful flirtation and to bolster up the story he produced some indiscreet little notes that had passed between them. The girl knew she had nothing really serious on her conscience but she knew also that her husband was insanely jealous. But thereafter, when Molnar was away at neighbouring towns on business bent, there was a secret visitor at the Nagzrev farmhouse. It was this and the ever-present terror of discovery that brought shadows to displace the happiness in Elizabeth's eyes.

The time came when the distracted Elizabeth pondered the strange tales she had heard about Frau Fazekas, who, it was whispered possessed wierd charms and powers enabling wives to escape the thralldom of unwanted husbands or lovers. So one night, closely muffled up, Elizabeth slipped away from her home, and a little later tapped half-fearfully on the door of the midwife Fazekas' house. She pleaded for a charm — a magic something that would drive away the unwelcome youth Palinkas and ensure her husband's continued love and his freedom from suspicion. That was how she explained her mission to Fazekas, whom she found sitting surrounded by bottles containing queer potions, and

"magic" cakes and confections. The midwife took up a small wheaten cake and pressed it into the visitor's hand. This cake, she said, was to be eaten only by the youth Palinkas, none other was to taste a single crumb, and from that moment Elizabeth could rest assured, Palinkas would cease to trouble her.

Clasping the small cake with its magic properties, Elizabeth sped back to her farmhouse, and a day or two later she found the opportunity she sought. Her husband announced he had to go into Szolnok to buy farming implements and would be away some time. As soon as he had departed Elizabeth, casting discretion to the winds in her eagerness to follow the witch's instruction, sent a message to Palinkas inviting him to have tea with her the following day. He duly arrived and amongst the things he ate at tea was the "magic" cake. Though neither Elizabeth nor Palinkas knew it, the cake which Fazekas had prepared contained a lethal dose of arsenic and the witch's promise that never more would Elizabeth be troubled by her lover was horribly accurate. Within twenty-four hours he was dead.

Elizabeth was appalled by the dreadful manner in which the "magic" cake had solved her problem, and gradually it dawned on her why Fazekas had become known locally as the "widow-maker." The death of her unrequited lover now preyed on her mind and under the burden of her guilt she became morose and neurotic. One day when her husband teased her with a tit-bit of gossip to the effect that young Palinkas had died with her name on his pain-twisted lips, she flew into such a violent rage that her husband was at a loss to understand the reason for her outburst. But he began to lose a little interest in his sullen and unpredictable wife and his journeys away from home now became more frequent and of longer duration. This was enough to arouse suspicion in the distorted mind of Elizabeth and it soon became an obsession with her that Franz had found himself a lover.

She resolved that if she had lost the affections of her husband no one else should have them. There was a remedy. So to the evil Fazekas she went once more, this time with the full knowledge that the "magic" she sought was the same deadly poison that had

eliminated the ill-fated Palinkas. Fazekas was ready to oblige and it remains to be recorded that within a matter of a few days a dry-eyed, half-crazed Elizabeth stood at the graveside of her husband, the handsome young Franz Molnar.

~ Maybe it was because Elizabeth did not try to make excuses for herself or place the blame on the dead Fazekas, or perhaps it was her youthful beauty which softened the hearts of her judges. Anyway "The Belle of Widow-Makers," as the papers described her, escaped the death sentence and she was committed to penal servitude for life. While in gaol she attempted suicide declaring, "I long only for death in which I shall again be united with the man I love." Unfortunately there was no "midwife" available to provide the "magic" potion that could bring about this celestial reunion.

## XIV

### THE AMOROUS UNDERTAKER

THE disposal of the corpus delicti has always been a problem for the murderer who takes more than a little pride in his or her exploits. The man who strangles his wife in temper or the wife who stabs her husband in a fit of pique, are not usually concerned about getting rid of the body; they normally leave it at the scene of the crime, then either give themselves up to the police or flee in panic.

It is only when the murderer attempts the 'perfect crime' that the problem of removing the chief evidence becomes an issue and he must then have recourse to one of the somewhat limited range of alternatives — burning, burying, hiding, or carving, all somewhat crude and untidy. Rarely does the murderer break new ground in this respect.

Vera Renczi was a killer, however, who departed from the shall we say, 'orthodox' methods. She was just as anxious to conceal her crimes as any other miscreant, since she was in the "wholesale" trade, but she was rather more hygienic if I may use such a term; for, after murdering two husbands, thirty-two lovers, and her own son, she carefully placed their bodies in specially made zinc coffins, and interred them in a mausoleum beneath the luxurious mansion she occupied in the Yugo-slav town of Berkerekul. Vera was methodical too. The coffins were arranged neatly around the spacious cellar in orderly array and inscribed on each coffin was the name of its occupant, his age and the date on which he left the world.

The killings and the burials had developed into a sort of routine for Vera and all of her 35 victims — one for each year of her life, incidentally — were done to death in a slow deliberate

manner that never varied in its technique. All died from arsenical poisoning administered in small doses over various periods of time — sometimes only a few days, sometimes a matter of weeks, but always long enough to allow Vera to gloat over the suffering of her victims.

And the motive for these wholesale murders? Jealousy! Vera Renczi coolly confessed this when at length the enormity of her crimes came to light. The green-eyed monster of jealousy has been the most fruitful source of murder from time immemorial, but jealousy like love, differs in quality and degree. There is for example the violent jealousy which brooks no rivalry; like that of the lover who would rather slay his sweetheart than yield her to the arms of another. This is, basically, a perverted selfish form of love and possessiveness which says in effect 'If I cannot have you, nobody else shall.' There is neither thought nor consideration for the loved one; no concern for anything except the urge to possess exclusively.

A totally opposite kind of love is that which inspires a man or woman to sacrifice personal feelings so that their beloved may find happiness with another.

To which type Vera Tenczi belonged you can judge when you have learned a little more about her.

Born in Bucharest of fairly well-to-do parents Vera started out with every advantage in life. She received a fine education, and from her earliest days showed promise of the great beauty which was later to prove a fatal snare to so many. Her mother died when her daughter was still a child, and her father, inheriting some property in Berkerekul, went to live there with ten-year-old Vera. Although disciplined by the several governesses employed to educate her, the child soon developed a rebellious, selfish nature that brooked no obstacle to the attainment of her desires.

\*Chief among those desires was the companionship of members of the opposite sex. She was scarcely ever seen about Berkerekul without the modern equivalent of a 'boy friend.' And as she grew in loveliness she had no difficulty in attracting youths who in the first flush of adolescence succumbed to her beauty. With an

easy-going father who fondly imagined that his daughter was simply high-spirited and could do no wrong, and with governesses who were anxious to keep on the right side of both girl and father, Vera was able to do pretty much as she liked, and — if what she liked was not always in her best interests it was not altogether her fault.

She had just turned fifteen when she was discovered at midnight in the dormitory of a boy's school, and this was the first of a series of indiscretions into which her waywardness led her. On several occasions she ran away with her flame of the moment, but invariably returned in a few days declaring that she had tired of her lover. In vain her father admonished her and it must have been a great relief to him when she fell head over ears in love with a well-known business man in the town, many years her senior. He was extremely wealthy as well as handsome and he appealed to the romanticism of the fair Vera to whom he was as greatly attracted.

From the moment of their first meeting, she became a changed person. She was now modest and subdued, sweetly content to wait upon her lover's every wish. Their marriage was one of the great social events in Berkerekul and they departed for their honeymoon in the Tyrol, with the blessings of the girl's father and the good wishes of all their friends.

Vera and her husband settled down in the vast mansion belonging to the bridegroom, and she soon became one of the most popular women in the town. She revealed great competence in handling the big household and she was a charming and lovely hostess. When, fourteen months later a baby boy arrived on the scene, the joy of both Vera and her husband knew no bounds. The young mother devoted every waking hour to the well-being of her son, but some three months after the birth of the baby Vera appeared in the town looking distraught and sad. To friends she confided the unbelievable news that the husband, whom she "loved beyond everything" as she put it, had deserted her. "He left me without a word of warning or a single note to say why he was going or where," she tearfully told them.

The friends consoled with her, proffering the comforting opinion that the errant husband would soon return; but to this Vera smiled wanly, saying, "He'll never come back to me."

She was literally dead right, for at that very moment his body, encased in a zinc coffin was lying in the cellar of his own mansion, the first of the thirty-five bodies to enter this domestic tomb.

A year passed in which Vera devoted all her time to the upbringing of her boy who, as the days went by, grew into the very image of his father. To the friends who came to console her in her loneliness Vera exhibited her son, remarking proudly on his likeness to her vanished husband. "So long as I have little Karl," she would cry pathetically, "my husband will always be with me."

And then, of a sudden Vera shed her grief and embarked on a carefree bohemian life, in which she flung convention to the wind and caused the tongue of scandal to wag in the social circles that had hitherto known her as the most circumspect of women. The night cafes of Berkerekul became her regular haunts and she was avid for the company of young men. Vera had reverted to type. One day she made it known that she had just learned her absent husband had been killed in a car accident, an announcement that paved the way for her obvious attachment to a new admirer. And, just as her first marriage seemed to have had a restraining influence on her so did her second big romance result in the taming of her unbridled passions. The object of her devotion this time was a young ne'er-do-well Josef Renczi, whose only recommendation was that he was an Adonis of a youth, apart from which he was dissipated and profligate.

But as soon as they were man and wife, Vera settled down once more to a quiet homely existence. No so however her husband, who soon tired of his young bride and began to seek his pleasures elsewhere. Vera was prepared to incur any amount of scandal in connection with her own affairs of the heart, and was ready to acknowledge she was not capable of holding her husband, but the one thing she was not prepared to tolerate was that her husband should find happiness in the arms of another. She, who knew full

well the depth and extent of her own burning passion and with what unbounded generosity she could lavish it upon husband or lover, could not endure the thought of Josef yielding to the embraces of another woman. And for jealous Vera there was an easy way out of the dilemma. Beneath the chateau in which she lived, her former husband reposed in his little zinc sarcophagus, and in this large and secret mortuary there was plenty of accommodation for newcomers. Thus, four months after her marriage to Josef Renczi, Vera was to tell her friends that her new husband had gone "on a long journey" adding "and I don't care if I never see him again," a sentiment endorsed heartily by all who knew of Josef's philandering.

Actually the journey which Josef had taken was *not* a very long one, just down a flight of stone steps into the cellar where his forerunner lay, but it was a bourn from which there was no return.

A year later Vera announced that her second missing husband had written to say he had decided to leave her for ever. The message itself may have been false but its content was inexorably true. So once more she resumed the gay life and passed from the arms of one lover to another, with considerable, if unladylike, alacrity.

Her wanton behaviour resulted in her ostracism from those circles where she had shone, but this did not worry Vera, for while she could bask in the adoration that she seemed able to inspire, she was content enough. Yet although she encouraged all comers, she was essentially monogamist in the physical relationship with her particular lover of the moment. Upon him she lavished all the passion of which she was capable, but like the black-widow spider she consumed her mate as soon as his ardours waned. For days and nights she would then sit beside him, tenderly administering the small doses of arsenic which would eventually usher him into eternity and cellar below!

One after another her lovers were enticed — and doomed — into her fatal bower. Three old retainers who believed their mistress could do no wrong, accepted the presence of the various lovers as a part of the routine of life in the mansion and no

suspicion was aroused in their minds by the disappearance of the visitors. That no fewer than 32 young men could have vanished, after visiting the house of death, without a flicker of suspicion of foul play being aroused seems well nigh incredible.

But there is always a last time, and in this case then it arrived when Vera, instead of seeking a victim from the unattached males in the night haunts of Berkerekul, picked on a young banker only just married and desperately in love with his beautiful young bride. This love which he had confided to Vera seemed to act as a challenge to the Borgia of Berkerekul. She exerted all her wiles upon the young bridegroom, who, overwhelmed with her beauty and the violence of her passion, and flattered by his obvious conquest, soon became a regular visitor to the chateau wherein reposed so many who had made the last pilgrimage of love.

But despite the ecstasy which the bridegroom enjoyed in the arms of his mistress he soon became consumed with remorse. The illicit honeymoon was over. His own wife was going to have a baby. He must return to her and never see Vera again.

This pathetic confession was his death warrant. Vera insisted that he come to take a farewell meal with her one evening, when they would say goodbye in each other's arms as befitted the ending of a great romance such as theirs. The idea of this one last night of love appealed to the young man's vanity and he gladly accepted the invitation.

On the night of the last supper, Vera, ever the consummate actress poured out wine and holding her glass aloft drank to the happiness of "the only man I ever loved." He never responded to this cynical toast for into his glass Vera had dropped a fatal dose of arsenic adding a grain or two of strychnine for good measure. Then she callously watched him die in agony.

That night when the household had retired, Vera gathered his body into her strong arms, carried it down into the crypt of dead lovers and carefully placed it in one of the zinc coffins, on which she inscribed the name of her latest — and as it turned out — her last victim.

It was the bride-wife of the dead man who proved to be Vera's

nemesis. When her husband failed to return from his "short business trip" she made enquiries at his office, and was stunned when she learned that there had been no such "business trip" on the day of his departure, nor indeed at any of the other times when her husband absented himself from home.

At once she went to the police, certain that her husband had fallen into the toils of some evil woman, but because she ruled out any suggestion of foul play the police could do little. She therefore took it upon herself to rescue her husband from the rival who she was convinced had taken him from her.

From enquiries among her husband's closest friends, who now had no sympathy with a man who could desert his expectant wife, she was astounded to learn about a beautiful blonde with whom her husband had been seen in a cafe. Again she went to the police, and this time they had no doubt as to who the "beautiful blonde" was. Vera was picked up and grilled. "Yes!" she answered without a shadow of hesitation. "He was my lover. I trusted him completely. I had no idea he was married, but when he told me, as he lay in my arms one night, that he was married to a girl he loathed and detested, I dismissed him. I told him to dress and get out. . . . I have not seen him since."

A devastatingly frank but plausible story on the face of it, and if it seemed to impress the police, it certainly did not convince the sorrowing wife. She went on with her own enquiries and when she had gathered evidence about other men who had disappeared, she demanded that the police search Vera's house. By now she dreaded what they might find, but was determined that no stone should be left unturned to solve the mystery of her husband's disappearance. The police took swift action. They surrounded the chateau and broke into the cellar. The sight was unbelievable. The vast vaulted place was bare of all furniture except for one comfortable easy chair, set in the middle of the room. Neatly arranged around the walls were 35 zinc coffins, each containing the body of a husband or lover, and one the body of Vera's own son.

Vera Renczi at first denied everything, but as one lover after

another was traced from his home to hers, she broke down and confessed. Asked what impelled her to kill her lovers, she gave a little shrug of the shoulders, and said — "I could not bear to think that they might love another woman. . . I dare not let them go to the embraces of anyone else! . . ."

"And the easy chair in the cellar?"

She smiled. "I liked to go down there in the evening and sit among my victims gloating over their fate," she grimly replied.

"And why did you kill your son?"

"Because he threatened to expose me," was the callous answer.

Seldom has a more loathsome specimen of sub-human depravity been revealed than this figure of Vera Renczi who slew and coffined her lovers with diabolical precision. It is not enough to say that she was a sex-crazed nymphomaniac. She was something more than this. The nymphomaniac will yield herself to the embraces of any man in her lust for sexual satisfaction without any deep attachment to any particular lover and certainly without regrets or feelings of jealousy when she loses a charmer. The nymphomaniac does not love anybody in the strict sense of the word, although she may delude her lover and even pretend to herself that she is in the throes of a grand passion. Once her desires are gratified, she can lose all further interest in her partner completely.

With Vera it was very different. The sex urge was just as great, and she could go from one lover to another almost without pause, and with equal facility after the first fiery burst of passion had lost some of its ardour. But those whom she has possessed she refused to yield to another. Her embrace was the clutch of death.

The leading psychiatrists of Europe who were called in to examine the vampire of Berkerekul were vastly intrigued by the case. To the question whether man or woman was the more cruel by nature, one of them answered, "Given a man and a woman equally devoid of moral character, I believe the woman will usually be found to be more cruel." Vera's behaviour certainly bore him out.

At the final scene of her trial she listened sullenly as sentence of death was passed upon her, knowing full well that it would, in accordance with custom, be commuted to imprisonment for life. Scornfully she tossed her head as she vanished from public sight for ever. Still supremely beautiful, the amorous undertaker entered upon her prison term without a single expression of sorrow for all the carnage she had wrought. It was said that in gaol she continued to believe herself surrounded by lovers, and that at night the prison corridors echoed with her ravings as she talked to those who had died at her hands.

She joined the considerable company of her dead lovers a few years after her conviction.

## QUEEN OF THE UNDERWORLD

THE murderesses who have stalked so grimly through the pages of this chronicle are not, of course, the only candidates to qualify for the title of "Worst Women." The evil-doer in skirts is not necessarily always a killer, though her victims are usually members of the opposite sex. She may not physically destroy, but she can be just as deadly by luring her quarry to mental, moral and financial ruin, and always it is by exploiting her alleged beauty. Some are content to quietly rob their dupes of all they possess—for a fool-in-love is easily parted from his money—while others to gain their ends resort to blackmail, a vile and cruel crime which was described by late Lord Chief Justice Hewart as 'one of the most cowardly crimes it is possible to commit.' "Morally," he pronounced, "it is on the same footing as a cowardly assassination frequently repeated."

May Vivienne Churchill was the type of blackmailer who battered on the indiscretions of those who fell beneath her spell. She operated over a wide area, covering the United States and South America, Europe and Great Britain, and because of her ramifications she became known to the police of two hemispheres as the "Queen of the Underworld." She also rejoiced in another title, more personal, and one better known to the public in general—'Chicago May.' This cognomen she acquired during her desperate escapades among the budding Al Capones in the Windy City for May was game for any enterprise with money attached to it, and the gangsters of the 90's were quick to use her as a decoy for their get-rich-quick schemes.

Her loveliness was somewhat exotic, an Irish mist of golden red hair surrounded the beautifully chiselled features of a face that

bore a smiling look of childish innocence. Her figure was the fashionable voluptuous type of the period, full and curvaceous, and May knew how to use the whole battery of her charms to the best advantage. Yet—behind that appearance of baby-like innocence, there was a scheming brain, and beneath her rounded bosom there beat a heart as black as the record of her later crimes.

“Chicago May” certainly had physical attractions, but she was as bad as she was desirable and as treacherous as she was shapely. There was not, so far as I have discovered, one redeeming feature in the character of this woman, such as sometimes occurs in the make-up of even the worst; nor was there any of the proverbial honour among thieves where May was concerned, for she betrayed her own confederates when it suited her purpose.

She was not—as her nickname might suggest—a native of America, for actually she was born in Ireland of humble but honest parents and thus was a British subject. But it was in the States that she became notorious as a thief, swindler and blackmailer, and the associate and accomplice of some of the worst criminals of her time. There are many versions of how May Lambert (as she started out in life) migrated to America. She herself said that she stole the passage money from her father at the age of fifteen, but it has also been recounted that she left Ireland with her family and landed in New York at the age of nine.

The first authentic record of May Lambert is when “The Belle of New York” rang out in that city and chimed its way to a long and profitable run before being brought to England in 1898 to repeat its fabulous success.

In the programme of that New York theatre on opening night there appeared, in small letters, the name May Latimer, crowded in among all the other “Ladies of the Chorus,” and no one in the audience at the premiere of this tuneful musical comedy ever dreamed that this “Miss Latimer” who sang and danced with such verve and grace, would, ere long, be notorious in three Continents as “Chicago May,” the gangsters moll.

The Irish colleen with the lilting crooning voice and the grace of a young fawn might well have succeeded on the stage, but May

had early decided that she knew a better and easier way to hit the big time. It was not her talents as an actress which attracted the wealthy play-boys and induced them to lavish lush presents upon her, and although there was a dewy softness in her eyes, there was no softness in the heart of the teen-age chorus girl, as she weighed up the respective possibilities of her "stage-door johnnies" as they were called. The die was cast when the son of a well-known New York business man proposed to her. She grabbed the opportunity to break into Society, and it must be recorded that when May went to the altar she was a very beautiful bride indeed, albeit not a very loving one as her husband soon discovered. Scarcely had they returned from the honeymoon and taken up residence in the Park Avenue home which her father-in-law had provided, than May began to look around for new conquests.

No doubt her introduction to the rich people she met during the first few months of her married life, gave her an inkling of the fertile field of exploitation which was opening up before her.

Very soon the marriage collapsed, and May went from one lover to another, passionless in affection yet inordinate in her claims. She drifted from New York to Chicago, which was just then becoming the haunt of desperate crooks, including such big shots as "Kid" McManus and "Dutch Gus," one of the cutest safe-dynamiters in America. To these monarchs of the underworld May was a gift. In her attractive company the gangsters aroused no suspicion in the mind of a prospective dupe. She was what they called a "square." The luxury hotels and exclusive restaurants were their hunting grounds and in Chicago, under an ever-changing cover of aliases, May laid the foundation of the "badger game," which was to make her one of the most feared women in gangsterdom and earn her the nickname, "Chicago May." It has ever been a coveted distinction among crooks to acquire a lyrical cognomen that becomes legendary!

To a woman of May's physical charms it was an easy matter to manoeuvre a conversation with some wealthy and amorous male and give him the impression that he had made a conquest. Playing her cards with great artistry, the next step was to get her

victim to take her to an hotel—already pre-selected by May and her accomplice—and there she would simulate a passion she did not feel, ply her companion with drink (which was doped) and then spring the cleverly arranged blackmail trap. This was the “badger game” which varied only in detail; the process was always the same. On awakening, the victim would find all his clothes, his wallet and papers vanished, and seated in a chair beside the bed would be one of May’s confederates, who would indicate to the half-doped man the pretty serious position he was in. The lady’s “husband” had returned unexpectedly and discovered his wife’s “infidelity.” But the gentleman at the bedside could fix things! All the victim had to do was to pay up and keep paying whatever further demands were made. Such was the technique of the “badger game” and it paid off well.

Now and again things went awry and May and her companions found themselves in trouble with the police, but generally speaking the woman was lucky. In six cases of grand larceny brought against her in Chicago she was discharged, and in fourteen cases in New York and Detroit including theft, prostitution, dealing with firearms, and the “badger game,” she got away with sentences that were negligible.

“Kid McManus” and “Dutch Gus” had been hounded out of America by the vigilance of the Pinkerton agency—the “eye that never sleeps” organisation—and had gone to England. So when things got too hot for her in America, May decided that she too might find a more congenial atmosphere in Britain’s green and pleasant land.

Now about that time there lived in London a man whose exploits were destined in later years to thrill the world, one Eddie Guerin an international crook of some renown. Eddie was not what you would call a “nice person,” although when I came to know him in later years, he was a silvery-haired likeable rascal who had come down to petty thieving. Often he would slip into my office and borrow “a dollar or two.” But at the time of which I am writing, he had a long string of convictions in the States, France and England for various offences. One crime for which he

never paid the penalty was the murder of a policeman in Chicago with whose wife he had been carrying on an affair. Guerin shot the policeman dead and then went on the run, eventually landing in England.

c The American authorities never sought Guerin's extradition, doubtless thinking that they were well and cheaply rid of him. He got to work in England and was in and out of jail almost continually. His first sentence was served in Holloway Gaol which is to-day a women's prison.

It was round about the year 1901 that "Chicago May" fled the States to join her cronies "Kid" McManus and "Dutch Gus" in London, and she quickly set up business, combining luxurious prostitution with theft and blackmail. She gathered around her two or three other harpies who acted as decoys, but May was the head and front of the activities of what became known to Scotland Yard as "The Northumberland Gang," so called because the women chose Northumberland Avenue as the venue of their operations. This famous thoroughfare was noted for two of London's most exclusive hotels, catering particularly for visitors from overseas. The present big west-end luxury hotels did not exist, when "Chicago May" first came to town, so, in the lounges of the Victoria and other hotels in Northumberland Avenue, she and the gang spread their nets to hook likely fish.

The *modus operandi* was the old familiar one. If from the wallet of her companion of the night, May could obtain a large enough picking to satisfy her needs, then the dupe would be allowed to go without further trouble. If, however, the hard cash on him was insufficient to pay for the doubtful favours of May, then a little blackmail would follow.

"Chicago May" once wrote her memoirs after she reached the age when beauty had forsaken her, and her own description of one of these operations is rather illuminating: "I got a bottle of brandy," she wrote, "and then steered the John into a room in a side street. He was lit up by the time he got there, but I shot a few more Mickey Finns (doped drinks) into him. I slipped some little drops (chloral) into the last drink. In a few minutes

he was gone, dreaming no doubt of conquests. All I had to do was to pull the rings off his fingers. He had a lovely horse-shoe pin, a diamond-studded watch, and about £1,000 in notes which I also took." Altogether, a nice evening's work.

That "Chicago May" exerted an irresistible fascination and that men *did* fall for her in the most astounding way, may be gathered from evidence at her trial at the Old Bailey in 1907. Detective Inspector Stockley of Scotland Yard said he found no fewer than forty letters written in the most impassioned tones to the prisoner by a peer of the realm, as well as letters from other titled men, all of whom she had blackmailed. Another of her victims was a barrister well-known in the law courts and at least five men had committed suicide because of her. Stockley ended by describing May as "The Worst Woman in London."

But I am somewhat ahead of my story.

Although they both knew Chicago, Eddie Guerin and May had never met until she came to England, but Eddie and "Kid" McManus had already teamed up and were carrying out a few minor jewel thefts while looking out for the "big chance" (which every crook patiently awaits) to make a coup. It was the "Kid" who introduced Eddie to May. "Meet a doctor friend of mine" he said casually calling Guerin by another name.

"Doctor—hell," replied May. "I know who you are—you're Eddie Guerin . . ."

From the first moment of their meeting they took a liking to each other. May knew that Eddie was a man after her own heart who would stick at nothing and Eddie—well Eddie was just as susceptible as most men when it came to pretty women. So in spite of the "Kid's" warning, "Leave that dame alone—she'll take you for all you've got," Eddie smiled back saying, "I've got nothin', so what?"

Thus began the association between Guerin and May which was destined to lead to one of the most sensational and dramatic trials I have ever witnessed at the Old Bailey. Apart from their criminal partnership there was also a passionate attachment between this man and woman of the underworld.

At this stage "Dutch Gus" re-enters the scene. He was a tall handsome fellow who, trained as an engineer in Pittsburg, had taken to dynamiting safes in the States and on the Continent. Eddie had known him in Chicago, as of course had May. Gus had just left Paris after "casing" the offices of the American Express Company. There was a large safe which could be blown open provided the negro caretaker could be got out of the way. The safe acted like a magnet to the notorious cracksman and day after day he had feasted his eyes upon it, taking in all the details of its construction, and with true craftsmanship he had mapped out the best way of tackling it.

One of the main assets to the good crook is patience; only fools of the criminal fraternity rush in where angels of resource among them fear to tread. The first step in Gus's plan for robbing the safe was to have his letters addressed "c/o American Express Company, Rue Scribe." Thus his daily visits to the offices aroused no suspicion and he had taken pains to make friends with the negro. All he required now was somebody to go in with him on the job, and he knew Eddie was good and game and could speak French like a native. Gus also felt that the "Kid" might be useful in the project but he was a bit doubtful about "Chicago May."

"No!" he said, regarding her, "I have never trusted a woman with my life and liberty and I don't reckon that dynamiting a safe is a woman's job." Then he smiled and added, "But we'll take her over to Paris with us. We might be able to use her as a square."

So May accompanied Eddie on her first trip to Paris, quite ignorant of the set-up for the robbery at the Express Company offices. She went shopping while the three men devoted all their time to perfecting the plans for the coup. They found that between seven o'clock in the evening (when the premises closed) and ten o'clock at night, the negro went out for a drink at a local cafe and the place was thus unprotected. It was Gus who took the negro out drinking one night, and obtained a wax impression of the door key.

On the night of the robbery Eddie plied his sweetheart May

with plenty of drink so that when they retired she went off into a deep sleep which was precisely what Eddie wanted. He knew she would not wake till late the next morning, by which time—if things went well—he would be back with her and she would never know that he had left her aside. A good alibi was thus established.

Leaving May sound asleep Eddie thus joined his companions and one after another they entered the building by means of the duplicate key. They crept up the stairs to where the negro was sleeping, and before he could utter a cry, Eddie had stuffed a gag into his mouth. They tied him up and told him if he lay quiet no harm would come to him. Meanwhile Gus was downstairs operating on the safe, and a loud explosion, which simply shook the building, proclaimed that he had done the job. Rushing down, they beheld Gus frantically shovelling stacks of travellers' cheques and bank notes into the case he had brought. Altogether there was between £50,000 and £60,000 in notes etc., with some £4,000 in hard cash.

"Chicago May" was still sleeping the sleep of the intoxicated innocent when Eddie returned to the Madeleine Hotel with a small fortune in his pockets. He was anxious to keep all knowledge of his exploit from May, and he managed to prevent her seeing the morning newspapers when she awoke, somewhat bleary-eyed. Eddie however could not entirely disguise the fact that he was "in the money" for he handed a bundle of notes to May telling her to go and buy herself a few dresses—a most excellent antidote for a hang-over—and May departed on her beautifying mission.

But it was a boomerang. Walking along the Place de la Concorde May ran slap into "Dutch Gus" who beamed at her as he remarked, "Well May, guess you'll have plenty to spend from now on."

May was quick on the uptake and she had already glimpsed the placards announcing the robbery of the Express Company. Without uttering a word, she returned to Eddie and with cold contemptuous eyes she looked him up and down.

"Where's the money?" she demanded icily, "Either I get my cut or there'll be trouble."

Eddie Guerin knew he was cornered, and with ill-grace he disgorged his booty. May took the best part of it saying, "I'll look after this for you." It was as well she did for already the French Sûreté were on the track of the thieves. May and Eddie took train for Calais; the "Kid" was already on his way to Italy, and Gus has disappeared. At Amiens, Guerin was hustled off the train by a couple of detectives, and taken to the police station, where he learned that Gus had been arrested at the Gare du Nord as he was about to catch a train to England. He had been recognised from a description given by the negro. Promised leniency if he came clean, Gus "squealed" giving the names of those concerned, including May, who had really been innocent of any participation in the crime, although an accessory after the fact.

Eddie was always guaranteed to put up a good fight, and he stalled off the prosecution for some weeks. It is doubtful in fact if the police would ever have been able to prove anything against him for there was only the evidence of Dutch Gus. The "Kid" had made a complete get-away and was never caught. May succeeded in reaching England, and though she was dogged by that great sleuth, Chief Inspector Frost of the Yard, not a clue as to the whereabouts of the missing money had been gleaned. Yet the cheques were frequently turning up in London. May placed the bulk of the money in a Safe Deposit. Here it could remain until such time as things had blown over and the coast was clear. She was not aware that she was being shadowed, or that she had been betrayed by "Dutch Gus." All that she knew was that her lover was in prison, and might, in an unguarded moment, give her away.

She herself would not hesitate to "shop" Guerin to save her own fair skin and she knew that he might prove as treacherous. There is always a weakness in the armour of a crook, and it revealed itself in the case of "Chicago May." She could not rest until she knew whether Eddie Guerin had implicated her. So she did what was an incredibly foolish thing for a criminal of her standing; she went to Paris, called at the La Sante prison, and

asked to see Guerin. She was promptly arrested on a charge of receiving stolen money.

Months went by, and still Eddie professed ignorance of the robbery. Through an outside friend he got a barrister to appear for May, having engaged Maitre Henti Robert on his own behalf.

One day the *juge d'instruction* flourished a bundle of notes before the eyes of Eddie. "Here's the money you gave to "Chicago May" he challenged the prisoner.

"I never gave her any money," lied Eddie.

"Four men have been arrested passing these cheques." insisted the *juge*.

"Fetch them here then" coolly replied Guerin. "They are probably the people who committed the burglary."

It was all to no avail and at length Guerin and "Dutch Gus" together with "Chicago May" came up for trial at the Seine Assizes and were convicted. Guerin and Gus were sentenced to deportation for life—to the French penal settlement in French Guiana, popularly known as "Devil's Island,"—while "Chicago May" received five years' penal servitude.

Since then a great deal has been written about Eddie Guerin the "man who escaped from Devil's Island," and at the risk of destroying so colourful a story it must be stated that Eddie was never on the *Ile du Diable* which is one of the islands of Salut forming the settlement. He was on the *Île Royale*; Dreyfus of immortal fame was the only man ever to be imprisoned on Devil's Isle. Nevertheless Guerin's escape, after serving only a few years of his life sentence, was a considerable feat.

May, after her conviction, wheedled her way into the heart of the French prison doctor and got him to sign a certificate for her release on the grounds of ill-health. She had, according to her own account, promised to marry him if he would do this but she was saved from becoming a "bride" because she was deported to England immediately on her release.

So we come to the last dramatic chapter in the story of "Chicago May." After his escape Guerin went first to Chicago, then on to Canada, and at length back to London. One day he sauntered into

the "Horse and Groom" public-house in Great Portland Street, and had just called for a drink when a tempest of womanhood descended upon him, flung her arms round his neck, crying, "My God Eddie—is it you? I am glad to see you." It was "Chicago May!" There was no mistaking her joy at seeing her old lover and before long they had once more teamed up in a variety of minor criminal escapades. Together they went to Aix-la-Chapelle where May decided to take the baths. Eddie called for her one day and the attendant told him that "Madame" was in the company of a rich old gentleman and could not be disturbed.

"Tell her I'm not waiting," said the jealous Eddie and marched off.

Later he told her to pack her bag and get back to London. He was finished with her—or so he thought. He went to Berlin, carried out one or two good "con" tricks and then returned to London, where he fell in with Emily Skinner, an old friend who also knew May. Emily produced a letter she had received in which May said she intended to stick by Guerin because he was bound to come back from the Continent with plenty of money. The letter went on to say that she would play him up, take all his money, and then inform the Yard that the man who had escaped from French Guiana was in London. The infuriated Eddie at once set out to find May and when he ran her to earth he stripped every bit of clothing from her shapely body and gave her the biggest thrashing of her life.

"I'll send you back to Devil's Isle," she screamed at him in her rage and torment and she very nearly kept her word. May went to the police and a few days later Guerin was arrested on a French request for extradition. For six months the proceedings dragged on with Guerin under arrest, and at last the Bow Street magistrate made an order granting the application for extradition. Now Guerin had very little money at this time, and it redounds to the credit of Richard Muir (later Sir Richard), one of the greatest counsel of all time at the English Bar, that he took up Eddie's appeal to the High Court on purely humane grounds. And so ably did he present the case that he persuaded Lord Alverstone,

(the Lord Chief Justice), Mr. Justice Darling and Mr. Justice Lawrence that Guerin was of British nationality and could not be extradited. So Guerin was discharged, freed for ever from the shadow of the dreaded penal settlement.

While in Brixton prison waiting the hearing of his appeal Guerin met a young American crook named Cubine Jackson, who had fallen foul of the police over here. He asked Guerin's advice as to his plea when he came before Sir Robert Wallace at the London Sessions. As an old-timer with some experience, Guerin advised him to plead that he had got into bad company but if given a chance, he would never get into trouble again. This subtle appeal to the known kindness of Sir Robert succeeded, and Jackson was "bound over."

While they had been talking together in Brixton, Eddie had confided to Jackson the story of his association with "Chicago May," and how he had thrashed her. Guerin little knew that May and Cubine Jackson—alias Charles Smith—had already teamed up and were actually living together, although the younger man had remarked, casually, that he knew "Chicago May." She had, indeed told Jackson that if ever Guerin got out of prison she would shoot him.

On the night that Guerin walked from the Law Courts a free man, he went along to the old Provençe in Leicester Square, a famous haunt of bohemian characters (no longer in existence) and there learned for the first time that not only were May and Jackson living together but they had sworn to "do" him. Guerin in some trepidation, left the Provençe to go to the flat of Emily Skinner in Kenton Street, and had just reached Russell Square Tube Station when a cab pulled up and a voice that he knew only too well, shrieked, "There he is . . ."

Jackson and May leapt out of the cab and a gun began to blaze. Guerin jumped about to dodge the fusilade while "Chicago May" stood in the doorway of a shop screaming "Kill him Charlie . . ." But Smith, after wounding Eddie, fled into the darkness leaving his red-haired moll cowering in the doorway.

Guerin hobbled towards May. "When you couldn't send me

back to Devil's Island," he cried, his face twisted with pain from a bullet wound in his foot, "you stoop to murder, you whore . . ."

"I'm only sorry it didn't succeed" responded May.

The police went in chase of Smith who fired point-blank at the officer who caught up with him, but his gun was empty. Nevertheless, he was charged with attempted murder when ultimately with "Chicago May" he appeared in the dock at the Old Bailey before Justice Darling.

In vain the defence suggested that Jackson had fired not to kill but to scare Guerin, who, it was alleged, intended to throw vitriol over his one-time paramour. Both prisoners were found guilty, and few who were present on that day in 1907 will ever forget the scene when the learned judge sentenced May to fifteen years' penal servitude. There was not a flicker of emotion on the face of this evil woman as she heard the terrible sentence passed upon her. Still beautiful but somewhat tarnished as the result of the life she had led, May turned quietly with a cynical smile on her lips and made her way to the cells below.

It was then the turn of Jackson to receive sentence. "You will go to penal servitude for life," said the dry crackling voice of Mr. Justice Darling. For a moment the man in the dock stood stunned and then, seized with an insane frenzy, he hurled a string of curses and blasphemy at the quiet figure on the Bench. Throughout the case, his weak sullen mouth had simply twitched with apprehension as he heard the evidence against him. But now he screamed his threats and curses with all the venom of a madman until he was forcibly hustled below.

"Chicago May" was released from Aylesbury Gaol some twelve years later and was immediately deported to the States. From 1918 till 1926 she was continually giving trouble to the American police and one day there appeared from her pen the book of memoirs to which I have referred.

Let her own words be her epitaph so far as we are concerned.

"I have never suffered from the qualms of conscience. I have had no regrets—except when I was caught. I am not really sorry I was a criminal . . ."

May was destined to hit the headlines yet once again. In 1928 came the news that she was about to become a bride. The man of her choice was a young crook known as Netley Lucas, one of the most impudent masqueraders and swindlers who ever enjoyed free lodgings in H.M. Prisons. He loved to pose as a "Lord," an "Honourable" or "Colonel" and became notorious for selling the fictitious biographies of royal personages. He even wrote the "story" of one of our most famous judges. In the States he sought out "Chicago May" and spread the story of their forthcoming marriage. The suggestion was that they intended to make amends for their past misdeeds by collaborating in the writing of books based on their own wide experience to show that crime does not pay.

It was of course a "publicity gag" and no books were ever forthcoming. Within a few months of this fictitious romance, in May 1929, the Queen of the Underworld died in a Philadelphia hospital. Netley Lucas died from asphyxiation in a smoke-filled room in 1940.

## XVI

### THE "MERCY" POISONER

**W**HEN a woman murders for gain we see the female of the species at her very worst.

Jealousy, passion or hatred may goad a woman into slaying a rival, a faithless lover or a cruel husband, and the aberration may indeed evoke a certain amount of sympathy, but when a woman murders for gain none of these emotional disturbances are present and we see her responding to the worst and basest impulses of the human being.

Pretty, blonde, thirty-one-year-old Anna Marie Hahn, an ex-German school-mistress, was such a murderess. In the brief space of eight years she murdered at least a dozen old men from whom she managed to extract over £12,000. The issue which an American jury had to decide when the golden-haired Anna was brought to trial, was whether she was an "angel of mercy" as she claimed to be, or whether she was one of the most cruel and calculating killers of modern times.

"I love to make old people comfy," she declared on her arrest, scouting the very idea that in ministering to the needs of her aged and ailing charges, she was only concerned with acquiring their worldly possessions. The jury had no difficulty in coming to a decision, nor will the reader after pursuing the story of Anna's exploits.

She was born in Germany and was working as a teacher in a village school when she met Phillip Hahn, a young telegraphist, with whom she immediately fell in love. When Anna and Phillip married in 1924, Germany was in the throes of post-war depression, Hitler was still merely Shickelgruber and the Nazi party only just beginning to rear its head. The young husband

was ambitious and realising that there would be little scope in Germany for years to come, the Hahn's emigrated to the States in 1929 together with their baby son.

They soon settled down in America and the future looked promising except for one fly in the matrimonial ointment — Anna was extravagant! She lived beyond her means, being spurred on by that fatal suburban urge of "keeping up with the Jones's." Her extravagance was a source of worry to her hard working and ambitious husband who struggled to give Anna all she wanted, and domestic squabbles became ever more frequent.

Anna took to going out at nights to the sing-songs at the beer-gardens in the German colony of Cincinnati, and she was very popular at these gatherings because of her beauty and vivacity, and the pleasant contralto voice with which she sang ballads and folk songs. Particularly popular was she with the more elderly frequenters of the beer gardens, men who had sought refuge in the States from the Nazi menace which shrouded their native land. To them Anna was sweet and gentle, ever concerned about their health problems, and ready to lend a little help in their domestic affairs. A few of these old gentlemen were perhaps more than paternal in their feelings towards Anna but she never resented their amorous advances, and so won her way into their hearts. To the more wealthy of these elderly emigrés Anna was especially attractive and accommodating, and they rewarded her with presents of money and promises that they would not forget her in their wills. Nor did Anna overlook a few elderly ladies who seemed in need of her tender ministrations.

It was, to say the least, a strange coincidence that one by one the elderly friends of Anna Hahn all died from some sort of intestinal trouble, in spite of the apparently devoted care with which Anna had nursed them. The deaths were attributed to the natural processes of senility and old age, and Anna was present at the funerals of her aged charges, although she did not wear mourning. It seemed only natural and proper that Anna should benefit to the extent of a few thousand dollars, as a reward for her unpaid services to these old people, and it was Anna herself

who told of her good fortune and her surprise that she should have been "so kindly remembered."

Modestly she told her friends: "It was just my hobby to nurse these old people exiled from their own land. I could not bear to see them lonely in a strange country. I just did whatever I could to make their lives happy." She omitted to say she had also considerably shortened their lives and also omitted to mention the full extent of the legacies and bonds she secured from her victims.

As the old men vanished from the beer garden haunts others took their places and among them was Ernest Kohler, who, when he died in 1933 left Anna a very fine house which was let out in offices. A Dr. Arthur Vos had his surgery in his building, and it was from the doctor's desk that the woman who "loved to make old people comfy" one day pilfered several blank prescription forms, the motive for which theft only became obvious later. Anna's murder for money racket might have gone on for years had she not in a burst of over confidence, started to speed along the highway of crime. She stepped up the pace and crashed. It was the unseemly haste with which she dispatched Jacob Wagner, a sixty-eight-year-old German gardener, that proved her undoing. He was hale and hearty when he was introduced to Anna Hahn, on June 1st 1937, but one day later he was dead, which was pretty fast work even for such a hustler to eternity as the ex-school mistress. This sudden demise was followed by the untimely departure of another of her charges — George Opendorfer aged seventy.

The symptoms of these two victims were the same — violent purging followed by collapse and death, and when Captain Patrick Hayes, Chief of the Cincinnati police was informed of this strange coincidence, he ordered that the organs of Wagner be analysed. They were found to contain a certain purgative oil which would prove fatal if administered in doses of more than six drops.

The body of Opendorfer was then exhumed from its grave at Colorado Springs in which city he had died while on a trip

accompanied by Mrs. Hahn. He, and another victim whose remains were also exhumed had both died from the same poison purgative.

It didn't take the police long to link Anna with the mysterious poisonings, and when she was asked by Police Chief Haynes how she accounted for the fact that all the old people with whom she became friendly, seemed to have died from dysentery, she agreed it was "very peculiar" adding coolly, "But why pick on me?"

The police captain explained there was good reason for picking on Anna. He had searched her house and found sufficient of the poison to "kill half Cincinnati."

Anna broke down. "I have been like an angel of mercy to them," she wept, "and the last thing that would ever enter my head would be to harm these dear old men."

Some time later Anna's husband handed to the police a half-empty bottle containing some liquid, which he said he had taken from his wife during a quarrel.

"Twice she tried to insure my life for £5,000," he told the police, "but the insurance company would not accept me. I also experienced some of the same purging symptoms after taking medicine she brought to me." The bottle he had handed over proved to contain poison. The bodies of many other "friends" of Anna's were dug up and in all traces of poison were found, not always the purgative oil type which Anna had used so liberally, but, as Captain Haynes stated, "at least four varieties of deadly poisons."

A glimpse into the bookcase at the home of the blonde poisoner, showed that her literary taste ran largely to books on crime, particularly those dealing with poisoning. Many of these volumes were marked and underlined at various passages.

But still Anna Hahn protested that it was only as an angel of mercy that she had entered the lives of those who had died so soon after knowing her. Only once did she break down; that was when it was proved that she had obtained thirteen poisons and narcotics on the prescription forms which she had stolen from the surgery of Dr. Vos. She had forged his name and had sent her own

twelve-year-old son to the drug stores to purchase the poison.

Two of her intended victims who escaped were Mrs. Olive Koehler, an old lady of ninety-five, and Mary Arnold, aged seventy-seven. They were being "looked after" by Anna at the time of her arrest, and they had already lent her the equivalent of £100 each, and had also signed wills leaving their remaining property to her.

The prisoner exhibited little emotion throughout the trial even when her counsel beseeched the jury to set her free so that she could "return to her twelve-year-old son." She went to the death house without a tinge of remorse, there to queen it over the other prisoners who had not achieved her notoriety. Nor did she wilt in the least when at long last, in May 1938, she learned that she was due for the electric chair. She asked permission to hold a party two nights before she was to die, at which the guests should be about a score of the crime reporters who had given her such a "good show" during the trial.

It was just a friendly gathering. As the Pressmen were shown into the death cell, Anna greeted them by their Christian names and gave them a handshake. There was nothing melancholy about her as she laughed and joked about their descriptions of her. "Not much like a 'beautiful Blonde' now," she commented wryly, and her final request to the reporters was "give me a good write up when its all over."

It has to be recorded that Anna who had meted out death so liberally and so callously went to her own doom with bravado and something akin to bravery.







